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SASQUATCH

M.E. Knerr

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For DANNY . . . in memory of a dark night
in a Pennsylvania farmhouse where, together,
we embarked upon a novel based on the
sasquatch – the last of the legends

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is a work of fiction.

There is no town of Lodgepole in northern California, nor is there a Lodgepole County. There is, however, a Willow Creek in that state, but the one mentioned in this book has no bearing upon the actual place. The characters as well are fictional and are intended to bear no resemblance to living people. The character of, and the information on, the sasquatch is as factual as research can make it.

This book is designed to show what *could* conceivably happen in the Pacific Northwest through carelessness. Searches are presently being conducted into the country to attempt to solve the enigma of the Bigfoot, or sasquatch, which apparently does exist. My intention is not to throw stones, but to portray a chain of events that could create a monster out of a normally timid and gentle giant.

M. E. Knerr

CHAPTER ONE

THERE was something with him in the woods, something ominous and unseen, that stalked him purposefully as he threaded his way along the trapline.

Even with the snow and the cold of the high Cascades, it was an easy matter for something to trail a man and watch him. The country lay blanketed with trees, granite-crowned peaks that stabbed into shrouding clouds, tumbling streams that sparkled and plunged through deep gorges of snow to hurl themselves in veils of spray down the steep sides of the mountains.

Snow, from earlier storms, still lay plastered against the pines like the canned whiteness that adorns Christmas trees each year. Occasionally a great green branch would sag heavily with its weight of snow and he would hear the muffled crash of it sliding free and falling to the ground. At times a bit of squaw wood cracked with the splintering sound of a broken bone, and he could not tell if it had been natural or if it had been done by the thing that followed him through the trees. Still he paused at each set with the slow movements of the old and collected what the traps had produced.

Methodically he worked a stiffened carcass of a mink from the trap at the edge of the small creek, being careful of the steel jaws that could easily snap down again on his numbed fingers. That had happened before, and the pain of it was not worth the speed. He had time. He was rich in time, if nothing else, and he squandered it willingly. Being careful and meticulous, however, were qualities that woodsmen acquired swiftly if they wanted to live to a ripe old age in these snow-capped mountains. It was that same attention to detail that had first told him that he was being stalked.

When it had begun, early this morning, he had not been too concerned. He had thought it was a cougar following him. They did that occasionally, watching men with such intenseness that it prickled the neck hairs and gave one the eerie feeling of being hunted. It never lasted long. After a while the cat tired of the game and moved

off, a tawny, unseen shadow disappearing into the woods or rocks.

This sensation was different, and he could not fathom what was out there. It had begun shortly after he had left his cabin, and now, in the late afternoon, the feeling still hovered around him almost like the way mist hung in the cleft ridges after a good spring rain.

The presence seemed to engulf him, making it bothersome to work the trapline. He felt edgy. He wished fervently that he was back at home, stockinged feet propped toward the fire, enjoying what was left of that bottle of Old Granddad. Or, better yet, sipping beer at the Pine Tree Inn at Lodgepole.

He liked the little town better than any he'd known, and at fifty-seven, John Burack had known a lot of towns. It wasn't much of a place, even now that the skiers had been coaxed into the county with the building of the ski lodge and the slopes east of the village. It had always been a mere wide spot in the mountain highway, but it was the county seat of Lodgepole County and sported a courthouse a mere five years old. A couple of bars, two gas stations, a post office, a church and a few stores, surrounded by residential dwellings, made up the village that had begun with timbering operations. The mill, farther down the road, was still the major source of jobs in the area.

He tried to ignore the presence, cursing himself mentally for being a fool, and pumping at shadows like an old woman. He was no greenhorn in the woods, particularly this stretch of the Cascade Range. For the biggest part of his life, he'd hunted and trapped this rugged string of mountains, and with a woodsman's acceptance, had shoved aside a lot of strange things.

The eyes had been one of the odd things he had seen but had never talked about. Just a half-dozen pairs of eyes, large and greenish-yellow, moving slowly about in the darkness of the woods. They had glowed, almost like the eyes of deer when hit by the ray of a flashlight, but there had been no light that night. The fire had gone out and the moon had long set. The eyes floated in the darkness, moving about in the manner of animals feeding. They hung in the blackness, seeming to float like a will-o-the-wisp, sometimes looking at him, sometimes fading

entirely as if the animal had turned its head. Shining the flashlight at them didn't improve things any. The eyes just stayed the same. Even when he built up the fire they remained as before, calm eyes that belonged to no animal he'd ever know, gentle, curious eyes, glowing softly, without malice. He had fired the 30/30 over their heads, but they were not spooked as a normal animal would be. He spent most of the night watching them, unable to sleep, and toward morning they simply drifted away in silence. There were no tracks that he could find in the light of day and, shaken, he had never mentioned it to a living soul. There were a lot of strange things men saw in the wilderness but didn't speak about. He felt sure that old Moses Elkhorn and Russell McChord had seen plenty, even though they didn't talk.

No man wanted to be called a fool.

This thing that dogged him now could be like the eyes, or perhaps like the strange glow of light he had once seen that had defied all description. If it was some such phenomenon, then he was acting like a kid. A woodsman didn't fear things without reason, even when concern had a tendency to fray nerve endings raw.

He didn't bother to skin out the mink. He had a sudden urge to finish his business in the woods and get out. He shoved the small, frozen body into the basket-like Adirondack pack and knelt to reset the trap along the stream. The stick that kept the cubby set free of leaves and flotsam had broken loose with the mink's death throes, and he had to replace it, as well as rearrange the stones that led into the trap. Finished, he stood up and looked at the heavy black clouds rolling in from the northwest. Snow, he thought bitterly, as if there isn't enough on the ground now. Well, it would keep that bunch of skiers happy in Lodgepole, but he was quite certain that the ranchers in the area wouldn't like it.

The clouds were gathering swiftly, churning up the skies in an effort to race the coming darkness, and he knew that he would have to hurry to finish the trapline. Even with the layer of snow on the ground the coming night would be dark and at this time of year the temperatures in the Cascades could plummet enough to freeze anyone caught out. John Burack had no intention of being caught out. Another half a mile along this moun-

tain stream and he could start his return trip, taking the few fur-bearers he'd caught back home to skin out.

His fur shed would be a better place to work, with the heat from the small wood stove and all his tools and stretchers handy to the work.

A twig snapped back in the pines and he whirled in panic, the .22 rifle swinging up in a reflex action that made him feel a trifle ashamed of himself. He could see nothing in the adumbral hollows of the forest. Christ, he almost muttered aloud, acting like a kid lost in the woods, just because some old mule deer broke off a bit of squaw wood! The feeling of being watched was getting to him. He cursed to himself and tried to shove the feeling of helplessness aside. This, he decided, must have been the way it had been like for the old mountain men when they trapped the Blackfeet country. Always on edge, always jumpy.

A volley of snow speared out of the gun barrel colored sky and he quickened his pace along the stream, his snowshoes making swift arcs in the unbroken expanse of snow. Three more traps and he could begin the hike back to the cabin. It was getting colder now that the inky night was seeping across the country and the powdery snow had begun to squeak under the rawhide webbing of the bearpaw snowshoes. His thoughts shifted from the onset of the cold to whatever it was that was watching him and he gripped the rifle tighter as he swung along the trail.

The stream took a slight bend to the west, working its way through a heavy growth of lodgepole and western white pine and the going became more difficult. Scrubby willows overhung the stream, glittering in the half-light with crystals of ice where the rifles had splashed their branches. The path narrowed to a deer track, close and hemmed in by the brooding forest. The vague shadows deepened among the pines as the gray, storm-lashed clouds blotted out what was left of daylight.

He caught himself thinking again about grizzly moving through these woods and he hoped that wasn't what was trailing him. It was hardly in the nature of the giant bears, but one never knew for sure. Over the years he had learned enough about the grizzlies to realize that he didn't know a damned thing. There weren't many silver-

tips left around these mountains but occasionally a cowboy looking for strays would find signs of one—maybe a young heifer with her neck broken and her body gnawed, or a dead tree all swatted to hell. Still, if it *was* a grizzly, Burack hoped that it wouldn't get braver as night fell.

The next set was empty but the trap had been sprung. He knelt over it, leaned the small-bored rifle against a tree, and reset it. The drift stick was gone at this one also and he shoved another one into the small stones of the bottom of the creek, not really wanting to take the time. The ominous presence was stronger now, an oppressive flush of fear that seemed to engulf him. He felt it almost like a cold hand touching the back of his neck. A wave of gooseflesh swept down over his back and arms while he worked, and he suddenly knew that he wouldn't finish checking the trapline. He'd never felt anything like this in all his years in the woods. It was, he decided finally, more than a man should have to take—the knowledge that something was hanging around on the back trail, never seeing it, never hearing it, yet always aware that it was there.

He stood up slowly and turned around, hefting the rifle and moving back on the way he had come toward the relatively open area of the country beyond the lodgepole forest. The shadows had grown deeper in the clutter of the trees, thick and heavy with the coming of night, and he quickened his pace as much as possible, the snowshoes scribing swift arcs in the snow.

When he saw the immense shadow move, seemingly at his elbow, he stopped dead in his tracks.

Eyes wide, John Burack blinked at the size of the thing in the semi-dark of the woods. It towered above him, massive, sheathed in dark, fringe-like hair. Man-like, the sloping shoulders gave way to powerful arms and huge hands that reached toward him as it moved. The hulk swung towards him, snow squeaking and crunching under the ponderous weight, and a thick, pungent, wild smell seemed to envelop him like a cloud. The thing made sound, a growling rumble deep in its throat. Frozen to the spot in terror, Burack clutched the ridiculous target rifle and stared as the thing moved toward him.

When he screamed, the wail of his voice was the sound of stark horror and death.

Cal Bowman kneed his chestnut gelding down over a low knuckle of hill and headed toward Willow Creek, deciding for the hundredth time this week that he hated horses. He wasn't cruel to them, nor did he overwork them. In fact, he probably overworked himself a good deal more. He even found, upon analyzing his thoughts, that he had a kind of grudging respect for their abilities, in spite of their lack of brains. He hated them because they were a symbol of cowboying, and he had found that he held them only slightly higher in his opinion than cows.

It hadn't always been that way, but in the last few years his disgust for open country had been a thing that pecked at him with all the persistence of a woodpecker beating at a dead tree. While his mind focused on horses, it went much deeper. It was all tangled up in the heat, the cold, the search for stray cattle, doctoring pinkeye, or throwing calves to cut out cancer eye, or the damned branding—a million things that hadn't mattered at seventeen, but at thirty had become repulsive.

Still, he knew that when all a man understands is how to handle stock, he's got to make a living at it. He wasn't getting rich, but he was eating; the way things were nowadays, there weren't a lot of people who had steady work. Still, he was getting damned sick of snapping the end of his lariat at the butt end of cows.

He spotted the heavy copse of lodgepole in the narrow valley on the far side of Willow Creek and urged the horse toward it, knowing instinctively that it would be a good place for cattle to weather out the storm that had dropped a foot of snow over the country last night. 'Thicker'n fleas on an ol' hound,' he muttered to himself as he surveyed the trees. 'Take me all goddam day to check out those woods.'

Mumbling to himself or talking to the horse was something he'd drifted into over the years since he'd taken to punching cows throughout the west. It was a habit borne of loneliness, and he didn't like it. It seemed as though he had been alone most of his life, and he wished he would have taken up the old man's offer of college instead of becoming the family maverick. To a kid, working as a hand in the Rockies had looked damned good. Kind of adventuresome. As an adult, it was a pain in the

ass. The horses didn't get any smarter, the hills got steeper, prices got higher and he was still smoking roll-'em-up cigarettes because he couldn't afford them Marlboros that all the cowboys were supposed to feed on.

He cussed the snow aloud and the gelding's ears switched back toward him. 'Damned snow,' he muttered through clenched teeth. 'Them cows could be halfway to Nevada an' I'd never find them with a foot of snow over their tracks.'

Something dark near the edge of the forest caught his eye and he moved the horse toward it, thinking it might be one of the cows he was looking for. It was a reddish color, about the shade of a Hereford's coat. It sure wasn't moving, though, and his thoughts swung immediately to bears. That, he felt, was all he needed to make a miserable winter complete—some dumb bear coming out of hibernation a couple of times a month and killing a cow. As he rode closer he saw that it wasn't a cow at all.

At first he thought that someone had lost a hunting coat and that the snow had half buried it, but when he rode up to the edge of the small stream he knew he'd been mistaken. His eyes widened when he saw a torso minus its head.

'Jesus,' he said and fought the gelding under control. The smell of blood and the sight of the dead man made the horse kind of dancy and white-eyed. He kept wanting to spook off to the side and the cowboy had to hold him in while he studied the situation. He didn't dismount, but he took a long hard look at what was left of the trapper.

In falling, his wicker-style knapsack had caught on a dead limb of a lodgepole pine, which held the body up out of the snow in an almost sitting position. Whatever had killed him had done so by ripping off his head, and while there was a lot of blood on his hunting coat, there was none on the snow. Last night's storm had buried the stains as well as wiped out any signs of struggle. It seemed to Cal that this fellow had tangled with a grizzly, and from the position of the body it had been damned fast. One swat and goodbye head. He wondered just where the head was, and rode the horse carefully around the area looking for it.

In the shallows of the creek he found it caught in the

tangle of roots near the bank. The torn face of the old trapper stared up at him through the sparkling water, the glazed eyes staring in horror, the mouth open behind the beard and hair that waved in the swift current. Strings of blood rippled about the face.

'Jesus,' the cowboy muttered again, and swung the horse away from the stream and headed toward the highway a couple of miles away. There'd be a telephone along there somewhere, and Sheriff Tom Murphy would sure want to know about this.

CHAPTER TWO

Sheriff Tom Murphy stalked into the brown brick of the Lodgepole County Courthouse, greeted a pair of commissioners in the hall and turned abruptly into his office, oddly anxious to face the problems of the day. Elaine Burns, his secretary as well as bonafide gun-toting deputy, was engaged in a phone conversation as he closed the door behind him. She glanced at him briefly, pursed her lips in a silent kiss, then returned her concentration to the caller.

Tom grinned at her, tossed his hat on the filing cabinet and shrugged out of his heavy jacket, his eyes studying the trim length of her legs. She thrust a pink tongue at him and tucked her legs back under the desk.

He congratulated himself, as he did nearly every morning, for having located her in this beantown in the middle of the wilderness, and felt immensely grateful that she was not only beautiful and efficient, but that she loved him as well. That was something his wife would probably never understand, and he hoped fervently that he would never have to explain it to her. He frowned slightly at the thought of his wife. Something had happened between the two of them during their years of marriage and he didn't know what. At times it was frustrating, but in the main it was baffling, although Elaine had a way of making the entire problem dissolve.

As usual he ignored the conversation between Elaine and whoever was calling this early in the morning and headed straight for the small bathroom just off the office. While he washed and dried his hands, he studied his face in the mirror.

There was, he felt, too much gray in what had once been a rather wild, and attractive, shock of curly dark hair, and too many wrinkles about his eyes. They had faded from a pale blue to a kind of gray of their own, weakening in the process until he had been forced to carry a pair of reading glasses in the breast pocket of his uniform blouse. At least his physique had retained a lot

more youth than his face and bore a much closer resemblance to his former football self.

A former jock, he prided himself on fitness and had nothing but disgust for age. Of late the subject occupied a great deal of his free thinking and he caught himself lapsing into memories of high school track meets, football games and senior proms. The memory of the Marine Corps was another thing that hung in his mind, and he remembered that he had charged into the service with all the exuberance of his first football game.

Somehow, and the reasons seemed hazy, he'd gotten out of the service and into law enforcement, eventually landing an election that had made him the sheriff of Lodgepole County. Not bad for a New Yorker, and he did like the town. It was a trifle smaller than his own home town but it was interesting. Police work was usually in a minor vein and a man had a chance to get away with a fishing pole in the summer. The construction of the ski lodge had brought just enough big-city flavor to keep him abreast of the latest techniques.

He ran a comb quickly through his hair and decided that forty-five was not his favorite age. In fact, he was against anything over thirty; but Elaine, with her twenty-five-year old thoughts, mind and body, seemed to smooth all the problems out and make his job seem important. Alice had once been like that, but not now, and he was damned if he could understand it.

He shoved his thoughts aside and went back into the office.

'Morning, sweetheart.' He stopped short of his usual playful grab at her, seeing that her blue eyes were serious and her brows knitted in thought.

'None of that this morning, dear,' she told him. 'I think we might have a hot case.'

'The phone call?' Murphy shoved a cigarette between his lips and snapped his lighter at it.

She nodded. 'That was a cowboy named Cal Bowman. Works for the Circle C ranch, about ten miles from here. He was looking for some strays that had drifted away in the storm last night. He didn't find the strays, but he found a body down in Willow Creek. Trapper, he said, or a woodsman. White male in his mid-fifties. He said he'd wait along the creek until you got down there.'

Tom blew smoke at the ceiling. 'Murder?'

'Not from what I could gather from the cowboy. The man had his head torn off, and Bowman thought it looked like a grizzly killing. You can't indict a bear, can you?'

'I don't think I could even arrest one,' he told her, then turned serious. 'That'd be odd, though. Bear trouble belongs in Yellowstone. We don't have that kind of thing.'

'1945,' Elaine said briskly, thumbing through a manila folder. 'On September 5, 1945 a grizzly attacked a group of hikers and severely mauled a twelve year old boy named Johnny Davis of Los Angeles.'

'Long time ago,' he mused. 'Well, while we don't have too many problems with bears, it isn't as far-fetched as one might think. They could come down from the north. Who knows?'

'Want to know where it happened?'

'Uh-huh, where?'

'Willow Creek.'

Murphy snorted smoke through his nostrils, then snubbed out the cigarette and walked over to the wall map of the county. He knew the Willow Creek area pretty well, having fished down there during the summer. It was mostly lodgepole pine, cedar, white pine and willow with the creek tumbling down out of the higher mountains into a kind of elevated valley filled with rolling hills, patches of timber and spotted grazing lands. Farther down was Elk Canyon, with the creek gurgling through steep, rock-ledged mountains that practically defied traveling. Most of the area was good deer hunting with occasional black bear.

'I'll get the snowmobile ready,' he said, turning back to Elaine. 'Why don't you call the diner and have them send over a thermos of coffee. Then give Charley a call and have him follow me down. Where is he, by the way?'

She tucked the folder back into the file. 'He left early this morning in the patrol car to check out a disturbance at the ski lodge.'

'A bear?'

'No, silly. As near as I could tell, some macho type followed his wife and her boyfriend up from San Francisco and found them cuddled up at the Lodgepole

Motel.' Her grin was a flash of white teeth. 'Apparently he wasn't a buttered-bun man and raised a little hell. Charley should have the matter under control by now.'

'People,' he snorted.

'Oh, and where is *your* wife, Sheriff?' Her tone was teasing and he grinned at her.

'Alice? In bed, bundled up in a shapeless housecoat with her hair in massive rollers. In fact, it's always in massive rollers.' He made a face, then sobered. 'Tell Charley I'll take the Wind Gap Road out to the Hoover place, then swing north into the Willow Creek area. He ought to be able to follow my tracks all right, unless it starts to drift.'

'You *are* taking the sled?'

'Yeah. I'll need it to bring the body back.' He pulled the bolt action 30-06 out of the gun cabinet and stuffed a box of shells into his pocket. 'Maybe I'll get a shot at the bear. See you later, honey.'

He went out the back way into the garage, shoved the rifle into the fiberglass boot of the snowmobile and began pulling the heavy black suit on over his uniform. It took a while to zipper it up and wedge his feet into the boots, and he was just shoving the machine outside when the skinny kid from the diner brought him the thermos of coffee.

'Here y'are, Sheriff.'

Murphy thanked him and tucked the bottle out of the way, but the kid made no effort to move. He simply stood there watching. He wasn't a bad sort of kid, Murphy knew; not a mental heavyweight, but all right. He tried to ignore him and dragged the sled out to attach to the snowmachine.

'On a case, Sheriff?'

'Yeah.'

'Big one?'

'Not in this country,' Murphy grunted.

'Out in the woods, huh?'

'Yeah.'

'Rustlin', huh?'

'Nope.'

'Somebody lost?'

'No.'

'One of them dumb skiers get hurt, then?'

Murphy straightened. 'Eddie, why don't you become a goddam newspaper reporter?'

Eddie was unabashed. 'Don't know how to write, I guess. Besides, Lodgepole don't have a newspaper.'

The sheriff cast his eyes upward, straddled the snowmobile and started it up. Leaving Eddie standing in the driveway, he moved the machine carefully out into the alley and across the highway to where Wind Gap Road swung out of town. In the clear area north of the little town he pushed the speed up, feeling the wind cutting through the heavy ski suit.

It was what the natives up here would call bracing weather, but even after five years of this high country, Murphy felt that calling this kind of cold 'bracing' was like saying that a blowtorch is warm. Although his home state of New York had a tendency to get a little on the frozen side, it sure couldn't hold a candle to the Cascades.

Just before he reached the small house and barn of Jed Hoover he found the break in the fence line and swung the machine out onto the large field that dipped downward through scrubby patches of pine toward Willow Creek.

A grizzly killing was a trifle out of his line, since nothing like that had happened since he'd been in this country, and he felt that perhaps he should have turned it over to Vic Croft, the local game protector. Of course, that could come later if it were necessary. Just because some down-at-the-heel cowboy thought it had been done by a bear didn't mean that it had been. There were, if one paid attention to the threats at the Pine Tree Inn on Saturday night, a lot of men around here who thought themselves capable of ripping off heads. If a bear were the reason for this death, he could always bring Croft in on it later. On the other hand, if a man had killed the trapper and was attempting to make it look as though a bear had done it, then the county had a real maniac on its hands.

He crested a low hill in the creek valley and spotted the cowboy's horse tied to a bush near the lodgepole forest. Cal Bowman, who had been hunkering nearby, stood up when he saw the snowmobile and waved his hat. Murphy waved back and a moment later slid the machine to a stop and killed the engine.

'I didn't touch nothin', Sheriff,' Bowman greeted him. 'When'd you find him?'

'Hour or so ago. I dunno about the time for sure. I called your office as soon as I saw what had happened. Hell of a thing, ain't it? Bear rippin' off a man's head.'

'What makes you think it was a bear?'

The cowboy snorted. 'What else would do it? One of them Bigfoots?'

Murphy grinned. The Bigfoot legend cropped up all the time in this high country. He'd heard about the shy, timorous, ape-like creatures that were supposed to inhabit this country, and he'd even talked to people who had sworn they had seen their giant shapes in the forest. A sheriff, however, became a sheriff not because he believed in Indian legends, but because he observed facts. 'You been talking to Moses Elkhorn?' asked Murphy.

Bowman grinned at that. 'Nope. Beats all though, don't it, Sheriff, the way that old Injun swears there's Bigfoots in this country.'

'Some people believe in flying saucers, too.' Tom handed the thermos to the cowboy. 'For the cold.'

While Bowman poured the coffee, Murphy studied him and his horse, seeing the kind of man that he had seen a thousand times before. A lonely man, part of what was left of the great American cowboy; a man who lived in the modern world but had his roots in the last century. A horseman in a world of autos, a hard worker in a land of relatively easy money. Murphy had never really been able to figure out cowboys.

He turned his attention to the dead trapper.

It was apparent that he had been thrown with considerable force against the tree that held him up. The bark of the pine had been broken by the force of the impact. Blood from the severed neck was all over the front and shoulders of the jacket, mingled with flakes of powdery snow that hadn't blown away. It was plain that he had been killed recently. Tom Murphy figured he had been killed prior to or during the storm, and tentatively fixed the death at between five and eight o'clock. Possibly around six o'clock last evening, judging from the snow around the legs. There hadn't been much wind and the body was rather sheltered by the surrounding

brush, so that whatever snow had covered the trapper's legs had probably come straight down.

The severed neck was ragged, as though the head had been torn off by extreme force, but there were no visible bite marks such as were usually left by a bear. Of course, he knew that if a bear had swiped off the trapper's head at the outset and the body hadn't moved around much, an ordinary grizzly might have simply lost interest and wandered off. That was possible, just as he knew it was also possible that the man had been murdered, even though he knew it would take a hell of a lot of force to rip off a head.

'Where's the head?' Tom asked, at length.

Bowman gestured with his coffee cup. 'In the creek. It caught on some roots along the bank.'

The head faced up at the Sheriff, wavery in the clear water, the eyes wide and the mouth slack. He didn't know if the expression was one of fear or not. At first glance the face looked horror-stricken, but on closer study it was more the look of surprise, perhaps disbelief. Tom walked back to the snowmobile, got the camera and began snapping pictures of the scene, taking them from every possible angle to make sure he had a record of even the things he might not notice now.

Finished, he took the empty cup from the cowboy and filled it for himself. 'What d'you think, Bowman?'

The cowboy was rolling a cigarette. 'Grizzly.'

'You sure?'

'No, I ain't, but it ain't every day a man gets his head knocked off in the woods. Likely a bear.'

'You know him?'

'Nope.'

'Seen any grizzly sign?'

'Nope.'

'Any Bigfoot sign?'

The cowboy's grin showed a chipped front tooth. 'Nope, none of that either.' He paused, then sobered, looking off toward the snow covered slopes of the hills. 'About all I ever do see is the south end of northbound cows.'

Murphy grunted and bolted the coffee, feeling the warmth flush out most of the chill that seemed to be

forever creeping in through the snowmobile suit. 'Want to help me get him in the sled?'

Bowman touched a match to his home-rolled cigarette. 'Don't want to, but I will.'

The body was stiff, frozen into position by the cold and by death, and the two of them had a struggle getting it into place on the sled and wrapped in the plastic tarp. Murphy fished out the dead man's wallet while Bowman brought the head up from the creek. He carried it by the hair and dropped it with a thunking sound into the sled.

'The pack too, Sheriff?'

'Yeah.'

Murphy thumbed through the wallet. The dead man was John Burack and he was fifty-seven. He had a rural address listed but there wasn't much else inside. Four one-dollar bills, a picture of three little kids, and a series of cards among which were V.F.W. and Moose memberships, and a Phillips 66 credit card.

Bowman was at his elbow. 'You gonna want me any more?'

Murphy shook his head. 'Not right now. I'll have to take the body in and have an autopsy performed. You're at the Circle C Ranch, huh?'

'More or less. Right now I'm trying to find a bunch of strays an' I'm all over the damned place.'

'I'll need you at the inquest. Nothing much, just a statement. Can I reach you at the ranch?'

'Yeah. Call Bud Walker, the foreman. He'll know how to find me, but he won't like me goin' to no inquest.'

'He'll have to like it.'

Bowman nodded and dropped his cigarette into the snow. He pulled the Winchester from his saddle scabbard, jacked a 30/30 cartridge into the chamber and set the hammer down carefully. 'Well, I got to get to work,' he said and shoved the carbine into leather under the saddle.

'Keep your eyes peeled for grizzly,' Murphy told him and watched the lanky man swing easily onto the horse.

Bowman waved and swung the gelding around to cross the creek and head toward the stretch of rimrock country to the north. With no sign of Charley, Murphy got back on the snowmobile and headed for Lodgepole.

He'd get the minister over at the church to develop the pictures so he could study them in the comfort of the office.

CHAPTER THREE

TECHNICALLY off duty, Tom Murphy shoved the door of the Pine Tree Inn open and ducked quickly inside to escape the rising wind that seemed intent on blowing Modoc Road and the town of Lodgepole all the way into Nevada.

The Pine Tree, he reflected as he closed the door and unzipped his jacket, was the meeting place for the town. Just a few doors from the crossroads that served as the center of town, the ancient bar was the place for conversation, news and friendship after working hours. A long, darkly finished place, it still sported the semi-nude oil above the bar that had been so popular in the last century. The circular tables of the past, however, had given way to a row of booths with high-backed seats along the left wall.

'Gusting out there, Tom?'

He grinned at the bartender's understatement and tossed his hat on the bar's slick surface. A thin, dark-haired man, Frank Hayes worked the beer tap with an experienced carelessness borne of years in the business and set a brimming glass before the Sheriff as the latter shook a cigarette from a crumpled pack and lit it. 'It sure is getting dusty, Frank. Roads are beginning to drift shut in some places.' He glanced around and spotted Russ McChord at the far end of the bar staring moodily into a shot glass. 'Russ,' he called. 'Better get your horse home before he gets buried in a drift.'

Fred Plankenhorn and Jim Hazen, nodding together at the bar, looked up to chuckle lightly, but McChord ignored both them and the Sheriff's comment. The young cowboy stood alone, as always, a good eight feet from the others. Murphy sipped on the mug of beer and studied the man.

McChord was a strange one, moody and quiet, minding his own business in an almost fanatic crusade, and the Sheriff had caught himself thinking about him more than once. He had drifted into the area shortly after his discharge from the service, bought a few acres of land

and built himself a cabin. That had been six or seven years ago, Murphy wasn't exactly sure, but he did know that it was before he'd been elected.

They called him a cowboy since he wore the gear and always rode a horse, but he wasn't. He was a social dropout, a man who disappeared for weeks at a time into the wildest part of the Cascades. He was an expert in the woods, a good packer if you could get him to work, and he was oddly proud of what little Indian blood coursed through his veins.

He was about thirty, and not much given to conversation with others. Usually when he did bother to speak it was only to aim a sarcastic remark. He was the kind of man that you thought you knew a lot about, but when you added up your knowledge, you actually knew nothing. No one in town, it seemed, knew anything important about him.

He lived by himself in his cabin about two miles north of town at the end of a dirt road, and he always rode a sorrel gelding named Brandy. He was a good hunter and trapper. He carried shrapnel in his leg from the Viet Nam thing, limped a little and was a heavy drinker. He lived mostly on his army pension and whatever he could pick up in odd jobs, and his short trapline.

His deceptively slim body, Murphy knew, contained an awful lot of power, and he put a man in mind of the movie version of a cat-eyed gunfighter. He wasn't bad looking, dark-haired and with a gaunt kind of look about the face. He was generally close-mouthed about himself, never spoke about the service and had never been known to lose his temper. Even his girl friend Carlene Blocker had trouble figuring him out.

'We were just talking about ol' man Burack,' Frank said, interrupting Murphy's thoughts. 'Think a bear killed him?'

The sheriff shrugged. 'That's a good guess. Doc's doing an autopsy now.'

In the silence, Murphy thought about this place. He'd bet that the knowledge of the death had been in this bar before he'd shut off the snowmobile. Frank didn't miss much of what went on in Lodgepole, nor did his customers.

'Been a long time since we had bear trouble.'

'Yeah. Anybody would have asked me, I'd have said there wasn't a grizzly within miles of here. In fact, I thought they were about gone.'

'Well,' Frank mused, 'either it was a grizzly or someone killed him. Suicides sure don't rip off their own heads.'

'Aw, nobody killed him, not *that* way.' It was Jim Hazen who had spoken up. Thick-set and gray, with a chunky, rugged face, he was a retired logger who lived along the highway that switchbacked down into the city. He reminded most residents of Wallace Beery, except that his iron-gray hair was usually tousled. 'Take a hell of a lot of muscle to pull off a man's head.'

'It could have been done by someone though,' Fred Plankenhorn cut in. A thin man, he crouched behind wire-rimmed glasses and was apt to jump radically to conclusions at times. 'Maybe he was killed somewhere else and dumped there before the snow started. Could have been *made* to look like a grizzly did it. Frankly, I don't think it was a grizzly.'

'Oh, hell, who'd kill an old trapper,' Hazen protested. 'Besides, his head was *torn* off. Wasn't it, Murph?'

'Looked like it,' Murphy said gently. 'We'll check it out, though, from every angle we can. With all these skiers up here for the season, I'd hate to think there was a rogue grizzly on the prod.'

He finished his beer and put the mug back to be refilled. Down the bar, McChord still stared into his shot glass as though contemplating the problems of the world. He acted as if he hadn't heard a word that was said, but Murphy knew differently. The man's eyesight and hearing were like an animal's.

When Frank had refilled the mug, the Sheriff took it and moved down to where Russ stood with one spurred boot propped against the brass rail. Murphy took a swallow of beer and set the glass down.

'Russ,' he said, 'how's it going?'

The cowboy didn't look up. 'Fine, Sheriff.' His voice was gentle and soft, yet not quite easy enough to disguise the tight hardness lurking there too.

'Seen any bear sign?'

'No.'

'You knew Burack, didn't you?'

'I knew him.'

'Like him?'

'No.'

'Why?'

McChord tossed off the shot of whiskey and motioned Frank to refill it. 'Burack was a fur hog.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Means just that. For a while I lost a lot of pelts to someone, and I figger it was Burack robbin' my sets.'

'Was it?' Murphy shook out another cigarette and lit it.

'I never found out.'

'Let me ask you this, Russ, since you know the woods. Could a grizzly rip off a man's head?'

McChord shrugged. 'I've heard of them doing that, but I've never seen it. Grizzly usually mauls the hell out of victims. Does a lot of biting. Mostly they're timid.'

'And nasty,' Murphy suggested.

'Not really. You stumble onto a lone black bear and he's apt to run in fright, but he'll sneak into the edge of town and raid garbage cans. Grizzly's just the opposite. He'll do his damnedest to stay away from man, but if you stumble on him when he's hibernating or sleepin' near a kill, he'll tear you apart. Up in British Columbia, I heard they put bells on their pack animals to warn bears.'

'You think Burack might have stumbled on a sleeping bear last night?'

McChord swung his head slowly until he was looking Murphy right in the eye. 'I don't give a damn,' he said flatly.

Murphy felt the back of his neck getting hot. 'Why don't you just answer the question, McChord?'

'I did.' He sipped at his whiskey, then sighed in disgust. 'Burack did a lot of trappin' along Willow Creek. Spent a lot of time down there. I don't think a grizzly would bed down in an area where people were apt to come around.'

'Would you go down and check it out for us?'

'No.'

'Hell, McChord . . .'

'I mind my own business, Sheriff. I'm not a solid citizen and I'm not for hire. You think a bear knocked

off that old buzzard, take it up with Vic Croft. He gets paid for it.'

Murphy was about to say something when the door opened and Charley Spencer, his deputy, came in on a gust of wind. A slim, wiry man, he had twenty years of law enforcement under his belt, and it seemed to show in everything he did, even his walk. He was the kind of man whom you knew instinctively was a cop, whether he was in uniform or not. His mouth was a slash in an aquiline face and his nose was a hawk's beak created by someone's fist years ago. It was slightly red from the cold at the moment, and his blue eyes were watery from the wind.

'Damn,' he muttered in greeting to the bar, 'that wind's blowing. Got a beer back there, Frank?'

'What about the autopsy?' Murphy demanded.

'Bear is my guess. Doc's too. There's a copy of his report on your desk. Death, as everyone in Lodgepole probably knows by now, was caused by a blow that decapitated the victim. Apparently it was instantaneous. There were some bruises on the body, a few broken ribs, and a fracture of the right forearm.'

'That it?'

'That's about it, Murph,' Charley added a shrug as though he didn't figure it much to go on either. 'Time of death about five-thirty yesterday afternoon. Now what?'

The Sheriff stared into his glass of beer for a moment, then picked it up and took a swallow. 'Dunno. No one that I've talked to, including McChord here, has seen any bear sign. The snowfall covered whatever tracks were at the scene, and this wind coming up will finish the job. Call it a bear kill, I guess, and turn it over to Vic.'

Charley sipped his beer. 'I've heard of bears ripping off a guy's head. Read about it in a hunting and fishing magazine.'

'Elaine go home?'

'Dropped her off before I came over here. DeLaney's on the desk. I told him I was dropping by here if he needed me.'

'Okay. How's the town?'

'Quiet. Took a tour with Elaine before I dropped her

off, and even the ski lodge is pretty dead. Ran into Neil Stanford out at the riding stables walking around with a shotgun. Said something was spooking the horses. We looked around and didn't find anything but a skunk.' The deputy grinned. 'Elaine thought I should run him in for disturbing the peace.'

'I'd give a week's pay to see that. You sure it wasn't a bear?'

'No tracks. Murph.'

'Smell would be enough,' McChord put in softly. 'Bear smell carries a long way and it'll unsettle some horses a lot.'

'Should I check again, Murph?'

'Don't waste your time, Charley,' Russ said before Murphy could open his mouth. 'If it was a bear, he's long gone.'

Murphy snorted. 'You'd better be careful yourself, McChord. You have to ride out that way to get home.'

'There's a 30/30 in my rifle scabbard, but I ain't had to use it yet.'

The telephone rang and Frank picked it up. He talked briefly and motioned to the deputy. 'For you, Charley.'

It was probably DeLaney, Murphy decided, as he watched Charley pick up the phone. It didn't take long. Charley hung up and came back to bolt down his beer and slap his hat on his head. 'Bad news, Murph. You better come along.'

'Don't be melodramatic, Charley. We ain't on T.V.'

'Okay. Cal Bowman is dead. His horse came back without him early this afternoon and the foreman sent out a party to see if he'd been thrown and hurt. They just got back with his body. He was about four miles downstream from where Burack was found and his neck was broken.'

'Goddamn,' Murphy breathed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Russ McChord leaned against the bar, once more alone and isolated since the Sheriff and his deputy had left for the Circle C. Ranch, and felt the silence of the others weighing heavily in the room. The news of the second death had stunned them, and he felt that he could hear the beating of their hearts. To a man they held their beer glasses numbly, as though they had forgotten how to drink.

He shoved his wide-brimmed hat back on his head with a slender forefinger and shifted his feet on the brass rail. The jingle of his spurs sounded abnormally loud in the stillness. Two men, he questioned, killed by a bear? It was *possible* that a rogue silvertip had killed them, but it was a damned unusual situation if true. He had spent a lot of time in the mountains around here and had seen a few bears, but he'd never encountered anything like this. Maybe the old man would know. Moses Elkhorn was an Indian who knew the woods of the Cascades better than any man he'd ever met, and for some reason the old devil had taken a liking to him. Maybe, McChord had often thought, it was the Mohawk blood on his father's side of the family that had drawn Moses to him.

Whatever it was, Russ appreciated it, since it had furthered him as a woodsman. He had always been good, but the tutelage of old Elkhorn had sharpened him to where he hung, delicately balanced, on the fine line between animal and human. There was, he had decided long ago, a point of separation between man and animal, between wild and tame, and this seemed to be the apex all serious woodsmen sought. It was not just the ability to know game well enough so that you came home with your deer, your limits of rabbits or a string of fish. Given time almost anyone could learn that. McChord's quest in the woods had gone beyond the basics; his attempt was to bridge the gap between primitive and civilized, and he had succeeded, with Elkhorn's help.

The village of Lodgepole had come to regard him as a trifle strange because of his disappearances into the

wilderness for days and weeks at a time. Their tolerance of what they had come to think of as his oddball ways had only served to drive him farther from them. He, in turn, looked at the order and money-making sameness of their lives as though they were so many sheep all following the leader.

He'd always scoffed at the idea that men needed other men, that they were social animals. That was a lot of hooey, invented by a social structure which required that men believe it in order to make the damned society work in the first place. The lie of that kind of philosophy was apparent to him in the way that men tended to be *with* others of their kind, yet somehow managed to keep their own personal depth a secret.

The Army had been full of that kind of social garbage and he had felt as though he were constantly being swindled. All the comradeship of the buddy system was beyond him. Why the hell should a man rely on the marksmanship of someone he'd only known through the brief time of boot camp? Place your life in the hands of some shoe salesman from New Jersey, or a college kid from the football field of U.C.L.A.?

Yet, for all that, he was a good soldier. He followed orders and never argued or complained, seldom made any lasting friendships, and usually kept to himself. It bothered his officers and caused him a little trouble, but he simply figured it was more crap to wade through and let it go.

He was never angry. It made little difference to him just how many men he saw killed, his own or the enemy. He treated the entire fiasco as though it were a very miserable job that had to be done. When it was finished, he knew he would return to the mountains if he lived. Because of his soldier abilities his officers respected him in a strange way, never quite sure of the man, but always certain of the soldier. Most of them had never met anyone like him and, probably, they feared him.

Even before the war, nature had been his teacher. Nature was brutal, beautiful, efficient and fair with all her creatures, and, as one of their number, McChord had come to expect that death was the penalty for a mistake. He accorded that same kind of mercy to anyone

who made a mistake. His job, he felt, was to get home alive.

The war could not be won the way it was fought, and he knew it. He resigned himself to a draw, since he felt that no one but a fool could expect to win a guerrilla war, but shrugged it off as part of the job. Though he did his best to keep his skin intact, he still wound up with metal in his leg and was shipped home to the mountains. It was fair. He had made a mistake, and nature refused to allow it.

It was during that period of what people called readjustment that he began to draw away from them. They had wanted to make something out of him that he wasn't. In his microscopic home town they had wanted him to talk to the young people, and the paper, and to join the Vets or the Legion. His father wanted him to take over the family lumber yard. He didn't. In the end he simply bought Brandy and rode up into the Sierras. He never went back.

He bought a piece of land near Lodgepole and cut down the logs necessary to build a one-room cabin and a small barn for the horse, with a little corral beside it. From the town he obtained flour, sugar, coffee and, of course, whiskey, and he kept to himself. He'd met Carlene Blocker years later, but he wanted as little from her as he did from the town.

He was curious about the killings. With the instinct borne of years in the wilds, he knew that a grizzly had not killed Burack or Cal Bowman. It didn't fit. Both men should have had the marks of the struggle had it been a bear—they would have been bitten and mauled. Something was wrong somewhere.

That same instinct told him that sooner or later, whether he wanted to or not, he was going to become involved in this thing. He finished his drink and looked around the bar.

Hazen, Frank Hayes and Fred Plankenhorn were talking quietly at the end of the bar toward the door. The town drunk, old Ernie Nye, was nodding over one of the tables and would likely remain snoozing until Frank closed up. Ernie had his new fly rod with him, which was probably why he was here. The raffle drawing had been yesterday, McChord knew, and the old man had won

the rod, complete with a tubular aluminum case to protect it from getting smashed. He'd been celebrating.

Frank had just refilled McChord's shot glass, and was moving toward the cash register with the money, when the heavy-set reporter from the *Medford Chronicle* came in. McChord had seen him a time or two before, but never talked to him. On a brief vacation, Harry Backus spent most of his time at the ski lodge flirting with the college girls.

'Evening, Harry,' Frank greeted him. 'What'll it be?'

'Beer, I guess. Sheriff around?' Backus was chunky, with a round face and thinning dark hair, and a black diplomat hat on his head that made his face look rounder. His hand on the beer glass had short, stubby fingers.

'Went out to the Circle C, Harry. You just missed him. I thought you were on vacation.'

Backus chuckled, a slow, heavy sound. 'Newsmen are never on vacation, Frank. I gotta get something in on this bear killing.'

'*Killings*, Harry. Cal Bowman got killed this morning, too. That's where Spencer and Murphy are now, checking on it.'

Backus didn't look surprised. Newsmen never did. 'Well, I'd better get out there. I'll never get anything from DeLaney.' He gulped his beer. 'Where is it?'

'Straight up the main highway about ten miles. Can't miss it. They got a big sign up on poles.'

'Okay. Thanks, Frank.' The fat man wheeled and swung through the door, heading toward his car.

McChord waited a few minutes, then downed his drink and shoved himself away from the bar. He buttoned his heavy sheepskin coat as he walked toward the door, his spurs making a chinking sound.

'See you, Russ,' Frank said as he passed.

He waved a hand absently to the several 'so longs' that were tossed at him and went out into the swirling snow behind the Pine Tree Inn. It was light outside, a nearly full moon fighting its way through banks of clouds that were whipping toward the east.

Murphy would have taken pictures of the scene this morning and the preacher, an amateur photographer, would have printed them. Likely DeLaney would have

them over at the office now and McChord was anxious to see them.

Brandy nickered gently at his approach and he talked to the gelding in a soft voice. He pulled the lead rope loose and looped it around the saddle horn before stepping aboard and angling him toward the Courthouse. He found a spot out of the wind and tied the animal before going in.

Joe DeLaney had a face that looked as though someone had formed it of bread dough, a bulbous nose, puffy cheeks, and thick lips that were usually wrapped around a cigar. A retired accountant, he and his mousey wife lived in town and this job kept him from going crazy with boredom.

'Evening, Russ,' he said as McChord slammed the door. He smoothed the half-dozen gray hairs down on his bald head in a habitual gesture.

'Joe. Sheriff get back yet?'

'Not yet. Why? More trouble?'

McChord shook his head and shoved his hat back. 'Murphy talked to me about the Burack killing. Thought I'd like to see the pictures he took, if they're finished.'

'What pictures?'

McChord grinned but his eyes were hard. 'The pictures the Sheriff always takes and the preacher always develops.'

'I don't know if Tom wants anyone to see—'

'You ain't got a choice, Joe,' McChord said gently. For a long time he allowed his eyes to bore into those of the older man. It was a cold stare, filled with a hardness that DeLaney wasn't used to. The old man finally surrendered and handed over a manila envelope, making flustery sounds that might have been protests. 'Shut up, Joe,' McChord told him and studied the photos.

Murphy had used a flash and had known what he was doing. The minister had also produced a professional product in the 8" x 10" glossies of the scene. Everything seemed to be where it should be, and the position of the body against the lodgepole was clear. The various angles helped McChord get a good idea of how the killing was done, and the almost unnoticeable glint of light back in the brush told him that Burack had been armed.

He handed the envelope back to DeLaney, wondering whether the trapper had been able to get off a shot.

'Where's Burack's rifle?'

DeLaney blinked at him. 'What rifle?'

'C'mon, Joe. Trappers carry firearms, usually a .22 pistol or a rifle. Burack didn't own a pistol.'

'No rifle,' DeLaney told him flatly. 'Just the pack and the traps.'

'You sure?'

'Yes, dammit, I'm sure!' He paused, red-faced. 'Listen . . .'

'I ain't got time to talk,' McChord cut in, and headed for the door.

Outside, the pale, round moon still struggled through scudding clouds, and Brandy showed an impatience with standing around. He talked to him as he swung into the saddle, telling the big sorrel they would soon be heading home. 'One more stop to make, Brandy. I still have to see Elkhorn.'

The old Indian's cabin was south of town, a little over a mile, and he seldom left the place any more. He managed to feed and water his horse, remembering the days when the animals were symbols of wealth to the Nez Perce, but that was all. The pain of old age and arthritis had made it difficult for him to ride or walk, and he had given it up a year ago. The town youngsters, whom the old man loved, usually ran errands for him, bringing him the groceries and tobacco he needed.

His cabin was small, just off the highway, in a grove of trees that shielded it from the gaze of passers-by. McChord rode the horse up and tied him to the porch railing. It was late, but he knew the Indian was awake watching the moon. His spurs were loud on the porch and his hand never reached the wood of the door to knock.

'Come inside, Russ McChord.'

He shoved the door open and stepped into the darkened room. The old man sat near the small fireplace, his thin form wrapped in an old army blanket. Through the window, Elkhorn could watch the moon drifting through the clouds. Its light added more silver to the hair he refused to cut and wore in braids.

'Sit down, Russ McChord. The fire is embers, but you may light the lamp. I like the dark.'

'Darkness is a comfort, old man,' McChord told him. 'We can talk in the darkness.'

'I knew you would come tonight. The moon tells me that you will come to talk of the killing in the woods.'

'What makes you think I care?'

'You do. All men care. You pretend not to care about these people, but you do. You have made your life difficult by being hard against men. You blame them for being men, and that is as bad as hating a rattlesnake because he is a rattlesnake. You are a fuck-up, Russ McChord.'

'And you're full of shit, Moses,' McChord grinned.

The old man nodded, his silvered head bobbing in the light of the moon. He was like that, McChord thought suddenly—black and white, silver and darkness. Elkhorn chuckled. 'Yes, all old men are full of shit, Russ McChord. That is why you young men seek us out.'

'You know about the killings?'

'Yes, I know.'

McChord never thought to ask how he knew. Sometimes the old buzzard was baffling in the things he knew, even though he was crippled with age and half blind. 'Then you know it wasn't a bear?'

'Yes.'

'You know what it was?'

'Yes.' The old man nodded again. 'It has happened before, and it will again. When I was young there were such killings in the north and we had to leave until the killer died or moved on. They go crazy, Russ McChord. Sometimes they go crazy and do things that are not in their nature. You cannot stop them because they are as cunning as an animal but they reason like a man.'

'What does?'

'The hairy ones, the men of the mountains.'

'You drunk, Elkhorn?'

'No.'

'Then tell me, flat out, who did it?'

'Sasquatch,' said the old man softly.

CHAPTER FIVE

His world was a world of agony, of violent pain that burned inside him at times like the strange plants he had discovered occasionally in the forest, the plants of the pale people who came into the wilderness. They always had the plants, he remembered, and they were always the color of the sun before it disappeared. The plants ate pieces of the trees and stung if you touched them.

The pain stung too, but much more than just touching one of the sun-plants. There were times when he would lie on the soft needles of the forest, or in the snow, and moan with the throb of the pain. Lately he would hold great balls of snow against the hurt until the back of his head had lost its feeling, but it did little to stop the pain. The pale round light in the night sky had become small and had grown three times since the pain had started. He could remember the night well and it angered him.

Perhaps it had been his fault. Perhaps if he had made his night call it would not have happened. He didn't know. The Real People didn't know much about the ways of those whose bodies had no hair, except that they were as numerous as the small insects of the woods. Usually they were better off left alone.

Curiousity had gotten the better of him, and he ventured near one of their dwellings, where they raised the sun-plants. In the darkness he had known that he hadn't been seen, but the horse in the corral had become frightened, and one of the pale ones had opened up his living place with one of the sticks in his hand. The stick had made a violent noise and the pain had started.

That first hurt had gone away. He had howled when the burn had seared through his body, but later it had gone away. Now it was back and it made him do things that he didn't want to do. He had never had the urge to beat anything with his fists until the pain had eaten away at the back of his head. He sat very still in the snowy bush and lodgepole and thought about it, knowing that

he could not go back to his tribe with this agony tearing his body apart.

Before the hurt he had been curious about the strangers, but he and the others had been warned by the old ones to stay away from them. They were evil. They were dangerous. Yet the Real People had known how to deal with those who had little hair; they had always known that. It was a relatively simple matter to feel when they were nearby, even without catching the scent of their bodies. They were easy to avoid, much easier than the great bears.

That had been the wrong kind of reasoning, the belief that he could know the ways of all of the invaders of his land. It had gotten him the pain for his trouble.

The sticks were bad. They were what caused the pain. He had hunkered on a ridge, when he was younger, and had watched three of the pale ones carrying the sticks. One of them had made a noise like thunder and a deer had been slammed down a long way off. The hairless men had been too stupid to find it. He had found it long after they had gone and he had been puzzled at the damage the stick had caused.

Now it had happened to him.

He stopped thinking abruptly as another wave of agony lashed through his great body. The pain drove him to his knees and he wrapped huge hands around his head and moaned in misery. It always happened like this, a periodic torture that reminded him that the old ones had been right. It was never a good idea to go near the strangers.

But that kind of thinking was not important now. What was important was anger. Anger was his ally, his reason for running through these frozen woods. He had been violent the day he had ripped off the one's head and broken the neck of the one who sat on the horse. They had had sticks, and he had smashed them and thrown them away.

He was angry now. It filled his massive body with the same energy as the pain. He had a consuming desire to smash all the sticks of all the strangers. In the moonlight he moved out of the thicket and across the drifting snow, heading toward the place where his enemies lived. Occasionally he would scoop up a handful of snow and hold it against the back of his head.

He did not feel now that the pain would do the strange things to him that it had in the past. Sometimes it would not only drive him to his knees, but it would make his arms or his legs feel as though they were no strength in them. Tonight, however, he felt strong.

Strong enough to destroy all the sticks he could find before the sun came up.

CHAPTER SIX

McCHORD spotted the flashing light of the sheriff's patrol car when he was still a long way from the Pine Tree Inn, but he didn't move Brandy out any faster. Some damned fool skier carrying too much of a load of booze probably wrecked the sports car his old man had bought him when he went off to college. Besides, he had other things on his mind.

Sasquatch, or as they were called—Bigfoot.

He knew a little about them. Not a hell of a lot, but a man couldn't wander through the northwest corner of the country without hearing about them. The Indians, particularly old ones like Moses Elkhorn, were firmly convinced of their existence. Some of the younger ones were of mixed opinions, similar to the whites. Still, true or not true, if old Elkhorn thought for one minute that he was going to hand a story like that to Tom Murphy, the old man had another think coming.

McChord was pretty certain that a bear hadn't done it, but he was almost as positive that it hadn't been a man. He would have been sure if it hadn't been for Burack's head getting ripped off. That kind of threw him. How the hell could one man rip off another man's head? And why? As far as he knew there was no one around here, outside of himself, who had anything against Burack and there was no relation between the trapper and that cowboy, Cal Bowman. Of course it might be a little early to figure that the cowboy's death was murder. Hell, maybe his horse threw him on some rocks or something.

McChord swung Brandy off the road and cut across the empty lot toward the sheriff's car, noticing for the first time that the red light was not for a traffic accident. There were no smashed sports cars or staggering youngsters around the main entrance, but the lights of the tavern were on and Frank should have closed up long ago. He trotted the horse the last several yards, stepped down and tied him to one of the poles that held up the porch roof.

The door was open when he tried it and the bar area held Murphy, Spencer and Hayes standing around the pool table near the door. The town drunk, Ernie Nye, was lying on the green felt surface.

'Thought you went home,' said Hayes when he spotted McChord in the doorway.

'Went over to see Moses. What's wrong with Ernie? Drink finally get to him?'

'Something did,' Tom Murphy grunted.

'I shooed him out,' Hayes explained, 'when I started to close up. Later I heard a hell of a racket and went out in the alley. Found Ernie lying in the road.'

'He dead?' McChord asked.

'No,' Charley Spencer put in. 'He's beat up a little, but alive.'

'Who'd want to beat up Ernie?'

'Hell, Russ, who'd want to kill Burack—or for that matter, Cal Bowman?'

'Was he killed? Or did his horse just throw him?'

'Killed. I'm sure of that,' Murphy told him. 'Not only was his neck broken, but his shoulder and a few ribs. His horse was scratched up a little, too.'

'Cougar?'

The Sheriff shook his head and lit a cigarette he'd had in his mouth for the past five minutes. 'No. It wasn't a cougar. He looked as though he had wrestled with something for a while, at least. Maybe someone. His clothes were torn like a man who had been in a fight.'

'A bear, Tom?' This from Frank Hayes.

'Frankly, I don't know for sure, but I don't think so. It sure as hell wasn't a bear that walloped Ernie, but I'm afraid he isn't going to tell us for awhile. He's got a damned good concussion and he's been roughed up. We're waiting for Doc right now.'

'You don't think a bear got Burack and Bowman?' McChord took makings from a coat pocket and rolled a cigarette.

'No, not now. The cowboys out at the Circle C said that a bear attack doesn't look like that. Kind of what you said earlier. No signs of mauling or bite marks.'

McChord struck a kitchen match on the sole of his boot and lit his cigarette. 'What d'you figure?'

'Hell, I don't know. All I know is that I want to get

some sleep and forget about this mess for a while. By the way, McChord, we're getting a party together tomorrow to see if we can nail whatever, or whoever, it is. Can I count on you?'

'No. I got better things to do.'

'This is as much your problem as anyone's.'

'Wrong.' McChord's voice had an edge to it. 'Just because I drink in this town doesn't mean I'm willing to go out and freeze my ass off for it.'

'Outside of Moses Elkhorn, you're the best tracker in the area,' Tom said doggedly.

'I guess that's right, but Moses is too old and I'm too smart. You ain't gonna find any sign out there the way this snow is drifting. But you'll gather up a mess of men with guns they haven't blown the dust out of since last fall, tramp around the hills until you've shot some scroungy bear, then come riding back as happy as a bunch of flies in a molasses crock, and you won't have accomplished a damn thing.'

'You're an obnoxious bastard, you know it, McChord?'

'Yeah, I know it. Where'd you put Ernie's fishing rod?'

'What fishing rod?'

McChord sucked on his cigarette and headed for the back door. 'That's what I thought,' he muttered.

Outside, he took a final puff and stepped the butt out in the snow. Nye always came and went by the back door, so it would have to be around back that the attack had taken place. The light wasn't too good in the alley, but there was enough for what McChord wanted to find. The bright aluminum case would show up well, even in the sketchy light. It took him a few minutes, but he found it. It was smashed as though someone had jumped on it with both feet.

To McChord, finding the fishing pole only added to the puzzle. He carried it back into the tavern, finding that Doc had arrived and all four men were bending over the table to look at Ernie. McChord closed the door and waited for them to finish.

Doc seemed an unnatural appellation for the only doctor within miles. John Webber, M.D., was about thirty-five and to most of the population of Lodgepole looked about as much like a medical man as the typical lumberman looked like a surgeon. His rugged, square-

jawed face, with its broken nose and heavy brows, put most people in mind of a boxer. He'd never fought in his life, and had come into this country because of a passionate love of skiing, backpacking and the out-of-doors. Although there seemed no reason for it, he and McChord had never gotten along.

Murphy spotted him first. 'What the hell happened to that rod?' he asked, reaching for it.

'Looks like someone jumped on it,' said McChord.

Doc glanced up. 'Russell,' he muttered in greeting, 'you ought to get that horse in out of the weather.'

'Go to hell, Doc. What kind of shape is Ernie in?'

'Poor, and for once I'm not going to get down on the alcohol. It probably saved his life, since whoever beat him up certainly did a good job.'

'Hell, Doc,' Hayes cut in, 'there wasn't time for anyone to beat him up. He wasn't gone five minutes when I heard the commotion and went out. I didn't see anyone.'

'Well, Thelma did.'

They turned in unison to see Fred Plankenhorn just closing the door. He was dressed about like Doc, pants pulled on over pajamas and a mackinaw over that. His glasses were steamed from the cold and he jerked them off to wipe on his handkerchief.

'What she see, Fred?' Charley Spencer demanded.

'A goddam bear.' He hung the glasses back on his ears and fixed the bridge across his nose. 'Ya know what a nosy bitch she is? Well, she got up to go to the john, and a minute later she was shaking hell out of me, yelling that a bear was in town. Insisted I get up and take a look. That's when I saw the red light flashing over here. Who got hurt?'

'Ernie Nye,' muttered the Sheriff.

McChord glanced at him and noticed his brows knitted. He was thinking about the bear sighting and the smashed fishing rod case he was holding. Something, McChord could hear his mind saying, sure doesn't smell right here.

He took the broken case from the Sheriff's hands and their eyes met briefly. McChord looked away, concentrating on the aluminum tube. It looked as if someone had jumped on it with both feet, on purpose. When he

walked behind the bar to get Frank's yardstick, Murphy followed him.

'Where's that ambulance, Frank?' he heard Doc mutter, and the bartender said something about the time required to get up here from Medford.

McChord measured each dent in the flattened case. If they were done by feet, they were the biggest he'd ever seen. He let his breath out in a rush and refused to believe it. Not yet, he thought, and handed the case back to the Sheriff, then started back toward the pool table.

'Well?' asked Murphy.

McChord shrugged.

'Goddammit, McChord! Don't shrug your shoulders at me! If you have some hunches about this lousy mess, you'd better talk and talk fast!'

'Stop acting like a cop, Murphy,' McChord shot back. 'All you need is for me to guess the wrong way an' you could have all kinds of hell breaking loose in this town. That the kind of trouble you need?'

'What are you driving at?'

McChord fished his makings out of a shirt pocket and rolled a cigarette while he talked, aware that the others, with the exception of Doc, had turned attentively toward him. 'It ain't no bear,' he said finally, 'an' I don't give a damn what Thelma says she saw. This whole damned thing just plain isn't bear killings.'

'Then what is it?'

'Someone is doing the killing, but what bugs me is why. You find out the *why*, Murphy, and you might learn *who*.'

The Sheriff lit his own cigarette while McChord was still licking the glue on his. 'That doesn't add up either,' he pointed out. 'I've thought of that, but there's no motive I can see to any of this. There was nothing in common between Bowman and Burack, and there sure as hell wasn't anything to connect them with Nye.'

'Moses Elkhorn says sasquatch.' It was out before he could stop it, and he could feel his neck getting hot as he stuck the cigarette in his mouth and lit it.

'Oh, Christ,' Murphy exploded. 'That's all I need, the senile opinions of an ancient Indian. You gotta do better than that, McChord.'

'I don't have to do anything,' McChord said flatly.

'This is your case, not mine. You just go ahead with your posse in the morning, but the killer is probably right here in town.' He paused to drag on his cigarette. 'I'm going home. If I see a bear in town, I'll shoot him for you.'

'What if it is a Bigfoot?' This from Fred Plankenhorn, who also had the reputation for having seen the most flying saucers in Lodgepole since 1947.

'It ain't,' McChord told him.

'You know for sure? After all, there's a hell of a lot of proof that these things travel around the northwest.'

'It ain't a goddam sasquatch in the first place, and in the second place, sasquatches are timid and shy. You've probably read enough books to know that.'

'How about a crazy one?'

Before McChord had a chance to answer Plankenhorn's question, they heard the sound of the ambulance braking to a stop outside the tavern. The two attendants asked few questions, and were efficient in the way they handled old Ernie. They talked briefly with Doc, bundled Nye onto a wheeled litter and hustled him out into the night. For a moment after they had gone the men stood in silence; then Hayes broke it.

'How about a nightcap?' he asked. 'On the house.'

'I don't want anything to drink,' Doc Webber said, as the others lined up at the bar. 'But I would like to hear what Russell has to say about these sasquatches.'

'I don't know anything about them,' Russ grunted. 'Ask Moses Elkhorn. He's the one who brought it up.'

'Don't get your back up. I realize such a subject could be a bit touchy out here, particularly under the circumstances, but I *would* like to know about them.'

'Even talking about them is a pain in the ass. We don't know what killed those guys. Blaming it on the Bigfoot makes about as much sense as Plankenhorn's flying saucers.'

'Just a goddam minute, McChord!'

'Shut up, Fred,' Murphy cut in. 'What do you know about them, Russ?'

McChord accepted the shot of whiskey Frank set before him, took a sip and put the glass down. 'Not much, but something big has been making tracks all over the country for years. Sasquatch is a Salish Indian word that

means "hairy men," and the Indians believe that they are what's left of a race of giants. They stand pretty tall, maybe eight feet or more, and weigh about as much as a steer. They seem to be more human than ape, travel mostly at night and are completely harmless.'

'Have you ever seen one?'

'No, but then I've never seen a flying saucer either, and Fred will tell you they exist.'

'Listen, McChord . . .'

'Shut up, Fred. Could one of these sasquatches have done this?'

'If you mean do they have the strength, sure. There are stories that come out of British Columbia of those big bastards carrying off full oil drums. Yeah, I guess they could have done it, but they're not natured that way, even though old Moses says they are.'

'What do you mean?'

'He says something like they go crazy, you know? Hell, go ask him.'

Doc looked thoughtful for a moment, then looked at Murphy. 'Do you think that angle ought to be checked?'

'No. I'm a law enforcement officer, not an organizer of witch hunts. As far as I'm concerned, there isn't any more proof of sasquatches than there is of—of werewolves! You don't think I'd put out an APB on a werewolf, do you?'

'Doc flushed slightly. 'As a law enforcement officer,' he suggested lamely, 'perhaps you should . . .'

'Look, Doc, I've heard all these stories ever since I came to this country, but I've also heard that there isn't a shred of scientific evidence to support them. I prefer to deal with facts and leave the speculation department to those better equipped to deal with it. What bothers me is that I might have some kind of psycho on my hands.'

'What I think,' Charley Spencer put in, 'is that we're all tired and ought to get some sleep. Murph, I'll make out a report on all this if I ever wake up in the morning.'

'You'd better,' Murphy grunted. 'You're going to be in charge of the search while I try to make some sense out of this crazy day.'

'What time?'

'I don't think anyone will show until about nine o'clock, but I wish it could be earlier.'

Charley nodded and finished his drink. 'Then I'm going home.'

The deputy stopped McChord on the porch as they went out together. 'You aren't going with us?'

'No.' The cowboy swung into the saddle, and without another word, headed toward his cabin.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FRED PLANKENHORN shaved carelessly, part of his mind on the coming trek through the frozen Cascades and the other half on the dull throb of a headache that had centered itself just over his left eye. He decided that the face that looked back at him from the mirror would need more than a shave to make it look better than a death mask. Even secluded behind the thick glasses, his eyes still showed up puffy and red from lack of sleep and his skin had a grayish cast.

He nicked himself and cursed.

'What, dear?' It was Thelma, still trying to raise her bulk from the bed.

Lately she irritated him, and last night was the capper. If she'd have let him sleep, without seeing hobgoblins running through the backyard, he wouldn't feel like slashing his wrists. Of course, a lot of things bugged him of late, but she was at the head of the list.

'Did you say, something, dear?'

'Yes I did, dear,' he retorted in sarcasm. 'I cut myself with the razor and said, *fuck it*.'

'Frederick!' Her voice from the bedroom was stunned by his language and Fred grinned. That ought to get her out of bed, he decided, taking a childish delight in shocking her with a forbidden word.

Her form filled the doorway after a moment, her three chins quivering with indignation. 'I don't feel *that* is the kind of language to be used at home.'

'You ever cut yourself with a razor?'

'I don't stay out until all hours of the morning drinking at the Pine Tree Inn, either,' she snorted aloofly.

'Well, I wouldn't have been there if you didn't see bears in the backyard in the middle of the night. Why the hell can't you just go to the bathroom like everyone else without peeking out the window to make sure you don't miss anything?'

'If I hadn't looked out, you wouldn't have known about poor Ernie Nye.'

Fred didn't answer. Poor Ernie Nye my ass, he

thought. Before the dumb drunk had gotten himself creamed, Thelma wouldn't have looked at him. Now he was poor Ernie Nye. He wondered whether 'poor Ernie Nye' had regained consciousness yet and had talked about who, or what, had clobbered him.

He had his own opinions about it, and to hell with what Tom Murphy might think. It was a Bigfoot. Why the devil a Bigfoot would go berserk was more than he could figure out, but he was certain they would learn something concrete today. A good-sized mob of men tramping through the snow just had to uncover something, no matter what Russ McChord thought.

He caught that thought and turned it over while he scrapped his face. McChord. There was a man, even if he did tend to piss people off. Tough, hard, completely sure of what he was doing and where he was going. Everything under control.

Thelma finally turned, annoyed at his silence, and stalked out of the room. He could hear her clumping down the stairs in her fur-lined bedroom slippers.

It was a sasquatch. It had to be, and there was little doubt in his mind that his wife had spotted the giant after he had slugged Nye. The problem in her identifying it was her eyes. Her vision had gotten lousy over the years, particularly at night; in fact, she seldom drove at night for that reason. What she had thought was a bear could very well be a Bigfoot. Of course, they wouldn't believe him in town, same way they never had believed him about the flying saucers he'd seen. Overactive imagination, they'd said.

Overactive, hell!

Well, Sheriff Murphy would find out after they had finished with their search party today. He was positive they would turn up some sign of the ape-man. There would be at least fifty men involved.

He listened to Thelma moving around downstairs, then wiped the shaving soap from his face and tucked his wool shirt into his pants. From the closet in the bedroom he got the shoebox that contained his handgun and belt. There were eighteen rounds left in the loops, the brass cases slightly stained by the action of the leather. A quick check of the revolver showed him that

his having wrapped it in an oiled cloth when he put it away had kept it clean.

The single-action Colt had belonged to his father and was a handy weapon for a man on horseback, though he hoped fervently that the search didn't entail horses. It had been years since he'd straddled one of them and he wasn't looking forward to the saddle sores of another ride. Besides, he'd always found horses to be too damned much bother. They always bolted when you least expected it, or shied at a damned hawk's shadow, or ate too much and got colic.

He liked the pistol. You dropped six cartridges into the cylinder and you had six pieces of lead to do your bidding. The ones in his belt were only a trifle old, a thing that could be detrimental to smokeless powder. It was curious. Age never bothered a blackpowder cartridge and he supposed that it had something to do with the chemicals in smokeless. At close range he could handle the pistol pretty well, but at any range beyond the fifteen-foot length of the living room his marksmanship began to deteriorate. That was why he'd put it away in the first place. Besides, who needed a weapon in civilization?

He stuffed five bullets into the cylinder and set the hammer down on an empty chamber. He slipped the gun into the worn holster and belted it around his waist. From the rifle cabinet he pulled his old Winchester .32 Special, worked the lever to make certain the action was clean, then took it and a box of shells downstairs to where Thelma was rattling dishes in the kitchen.

'Where are you going with that?' she demanded. She was frying bacon and eggs at the stove, and the smell of coffee was strong from the electric percolator.

He lit a cigarette and poured a cup of coffee before he answered her. 'Tom's getting some of the boys together to search the country.'

'For the bear?'

'For whatever killed Burack and Bowman and roughed up *poor Ernie Nye*.'

Thelma ignored the emphasis on 'poor Ernie Nye' and forked bacon out of the frying pan to dry on a paper towel. 'It was a bear,' she said flatly, in the tone she generally used when she refused to argue.

'We'll see. That's one of the things I intend to check after breakfast. If you saw a bear, he probably left tracks in the snow.'

She turned to look at him. The bacon on the fork she was holding dripped grease onto the floor. 'You're right, Fred. Why, I never gave it a thought.'

'Well, hurry up with that chow and I'll take a look.' He glanced at his watch. 'Besides, I've got to get going.'

'I'm going down to Medford today. Is there anything you need?'

'A box of .45 cartridges. They want too much for them up here.'

'Pistol bullets? What on earth for?'

'My pistol, what else? I'm going to start carrying it if we're going to have bears prowling through town.'

'Do you think that's a good idea?' She dished up the eggs and set them before him with the bacon.

'Unless I want to end up like poor Ernie Nye,' he grunted. 'I think going armed is a damned good idea. That's the trouble with this country anyhow. We all rely on the law to solve our problems and most of the time the police are about as worthless as tits on a tomcat.'

'I think you're being a trifle harsh, Fred.'

'Harsh, hell!' He forked a mouthful of bacon and toast into his mouth and talked around it. 'We got two men dead and a third all beat to hell, and what's Tom Murphy doing about it? Nothing!'

'What can he do? It just happened the other day, so give him a chance. Besides, he doesn't know any more about it than we do.' She added cream and sugar to her coffee and sat down across from her husband.

'Well, he'd better find out something soon, because people ain't gonna put up with all this. It ain't New York out here, Thelma, it's the west, and your dad and mine knew how to settle problems like this. Have some eggs.'

'Coffee'll do. I have to watch my weight. But this isn't the west your dad knew, and you know it. It's a cartoon of the west—all you men carrying pistols that you can't hit anything with.'

'You been watching your weight for twenty-five years and you're still fat. You might as well eat, and stop slandering a hundred-year-old tradition.'

'You might as well settle down. You're as touchy as a

snake this morning. It won't do you any good to get all worked up over—'

'Somebody ought to get worked up,' he snorted. 'I'm going out to check those tracks. Where'd you see it?'

'In the back, heading toward the woods. At least I guess that was the way he was going. It was a big one, too, from what I could see.'

'You sure it wasn't a man?'

'I'm not positive.'

'That's what I figured. You ought to wear your glasses.'

'I don't need glasses to go to the bathroom.'

'Well, you never *just* go to the bathroom either. You're always peeking out the window, and if you're gonna do that, you might as well see what you're looking at.'

Fred shrugged into his heavy Woolrich coat and slapped his red hunting cap over his head before going out into the snow.

Overhead the sky was a soft blue with scattered bits of gray-bellied cumulus clouds scudding toward the east. It was cold, but the wind had died down to a slight breeze. During the night it had done a lot to drift the snow, and he knew that whatever tracks had been left wouldn't be in very good shape.

When he found them, he knew it hadn't been a bear that Thelma had seen. That is, unless the bear was walking on its hind legs and wearing snowshoes. The dracks were drifted pretty full of snow, but he could still see that they were very large and spaced far apart, about six feet he judged. They were sasquatch, of that he was certain, and he wondered just what the hell Tom Murphy would have to say about this find.

Thelma came up beside him while he was checking them. She still wore the baggy housecoat over her nightie and heavy black galoshes over her bedroom slippers. Her hair was still bound in those ridiculous large hair rollers.

'What is it, Fred?'

'Bigfoot,' he mumbled, still examining the tracks.

'Are you sure?'

'Hell yes, I'm sure. I gotta get over to the Sheriff's office and tell them what you saw. That ought to give us a direction, at any rate. You go on down to Medford, and stay out of these tracks.'

He left her standing there and went in for his rifle.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tom Murphy dragged deeply on his cigarette, stubbed it out in the ashtray and leaned back in his desk chair, propping his booted feet on the edge of the desk. Almost immediately he could feel the tension easing out of his muscles.

At the opposite desk and slightly ahead of his, Elaine typed a report, her rose-tipped fingers flying over the keyboard. She had swung diagonally away from her desk to work at the metal typing table and seemed engrossed in her task. He allowed his eyes to wander the length of nylon-sheathed legs to where they disappeared under the tight blue skirt. They were nice legs, accentuated by the high heels and the shortness of the skirt. Some women looked like hell in short skirts, but Elaine? Elaine Burns should never wear clothes, he decided.

The typewriter was like the chatter of a burp gun and he was annoyed with it. When he typed, with his hunt and peck style, he didn't mind it—but a trained typist was bad. He didn't like the memories of the Korean War, with the cold, the dust, the heat and the death. It was a thing he had practiced to forget and hadn't done too bad a job for the most part. Occasionally something would drag it all back, like the sound of a typewriter, and he decided that it was never really forgotten.

Like Alice. The picture of Alice seemed to follow him around when he was out with Elaine. Of course he knew why she was hovering around him. Guilt complex. Cleave unto one woman. The religious dogma he'd swallowed all his life. For better or worse, but somehow he'd found that he couldn't handle the worse—just like he couldn't handle Korea. There seemed to be no answers to the war, or to Alice, and sometimes he felt that if he could learn the answers to the one situation, the other would quickly become resolved.

Had he caused the ice between them, or was it her? Blaming either himself or her, he felt, was futile. Probably both of them knew that, since she had guessed by now that he was seeing a much younger woman. He

wondered what she thought about it. He wasn't sure himself what he thought about it. In fact, he wasn't sure he loved Elaine at all, but he liked holding her and kissing her. Feeling the smooth satin of her skin. Elaine had very touchable skin and it was hard for him to keep his hands off it—but that doesn't constitute love.

Across the way, Elaine stopped typing and smiled at him. 'Like what you see?' she teased.

'Can't see what I like.'

'Why, shame on you, Sheriff. Thinking about the case?'

'Yeah,' he lied.

'Gets hectic, doesn't it?'

Murphy laced his fingers back of his head as a brace. 'I never thought law enforcement could be so damned ridiculous.'

'You mean Fred and his Bigfoot tracks?'

'Yeah. Wasting half the morning looking at tracks that were probably made by a running man, whom Thelma mistook for a bear and Fred's imagination built up into a Bigfoot.'

'You couldn't track them?'

'No, the snow had drifted completely over them in most of the area. Even in the best spots, like between the houses, it was sketchy.' He paused. 'I can't get Ernie's fishing rod out of my mind. I keep thinking it was run over by a car, but it didn't look exactly like that either. Frank Hayes said that he hadn't heard a car.'

'You have any ideas at all?'

'Nothing certain. Just hunches. I should get reports back today from the lab on Bowman. Maybe that'll give me something better to go on.'

'Hunches? Such as?'

'Such as someone doing the killings and blaming it on bears, or . . . God forbid . . . sasquatches.'

Her blue eyes widened in surprise. 'Why would someone do that, Tom? I mean . . .'

'That's the problem, really. There seems to be no reason for the murders, no connection at all between the victims that I can see.'

'Slow down, darling. Maybe you're in too big a hurry.'

'I better hurry,' he grunted. 'The county com-

missioners will soon be on my ass, but I suspect the men will turn up something concrete today.'

'A grizzly?'

'No, and that's just the kind of concrete element I need. They'll make damned sure there isn't a bear screwing around out there and we'll be able to eliminate that angle. It'll also keep them out of my hair while I wait for the reports.'

'What about Nye?'

'I think Ernie stumbled onto the killer totally by accident and got clobbered. Trouble is that it apparently marks Frank Hayes or one of the others.'

Elaine walked over and perched on the edge of the desk, the position rounding the material of her skirt over her hips and thighs. 'Who was there last night?'

'Frank said that Plankenhorn and Hazen were there, as well as Nye. Before that there were Charley and myself and Russ McChord.' He paused. 'I've been running them around in my head in connection with the killings, but I can't come up with any leads there, either.'

'Then you figure the killer was waiting for Hayes? Is that logical?'

'Sure it is, but only up to a point. It's logical to assume that a killer was waiting for Frank, or someone he knew was in there at closing time, and that Nye wandered out and loused things up. What isn't logical is that the killer would be standing out there in the cold. Even sitting in a car wouldn't be too great, unless he had the motor running. But Frank says that he didn't hear or see a car.'

'Just suppose, Sheriff darling, you can't come up with any kind of connection between all three victims, or at least the two dead ones?'

Murphy lit another cigarette and blew smoke at the ceiling. 'Then I've really got a problem. Even a psycho has motives for most of what he does. Some kind of connection. God knows what's motivating this one.'

'Could a deranged person tear off a man's head, Tom?'

'I don't know, to be honest.' He swung his feet down and stood up to look out the window. 'You know, honey, that's the whole damned trouble with this case. I feel sure there's got to be some kind of connection between all these killings and the beating, but things don't jell

somehow. Things like heads being torn off and fishing rod cases that look as though they were stomped on.' He paused, then added, 'and here comes Russ McChord on that damned horse.'

'Oh? What for?' Elaine left the desk to look out the window.

'I don't know, but every time I'm around him he prods me into an argument.'

'He didn't go with the others, huh?'

'McChord doesn't *go* with anyone. He's kind of a mystery in himself, and frankly, I don't like him.'

'I hear he's good in the woods,' Elaine put in, keeping an eye on the approaching horseman through the window.

Murphy grunted. 'Good? Hell, he's the best sonofabitch I ever saw in the woods. Between him and that old Moses Elkhorn, I don't know which is better. He makes me mad though, him and his damned independence.'

'Maybe *that* makes him good.'

He didn't answer her and Elaine went back to her desk; the typewriter began its metallic stutter behind him. Murphy stayed at the window and watched the horseman step down from his mount, loop the reins around the bumper of the patrol car and head for the front door of the courthouse. Brandy swung his rump around to what was left of the wind and waited patiently. A minute later McChord came in, slamming the door as usual.

'Here,' he said, and laid a broken rifle on the counter.

The Sheriff walked over slowly, looking at it. It was a bolt action .22, or what was left of one, since the stock was missing back of the bolt. It looked as though someone had smashed it against a tree. There was snow packed in the splintered wood. Murphy shifted his gray eyes to McChord.

'What's that for?'

The cowboy shoved his battered felt hat back on his head and sighed wearily. 'It's Burack's rifle. I found it about twenty yards from where you picked up the body.'

Murphy didn't say anything, knowing that he had been outmaneuvered, and a slow flush began to throb in his neck. The muscles of his jaw tightened and he had an almost uncontrollable urge to vault across the counter

and smash McChord right in the mouth. The loner had a way of making a man look like an idiot and, over a period of time, tended to make homicidal thoughts skitter through one's brain.

'How'd you know it was there?' Murphy asked at length. It was a very controlled question, but the tightness was apparent, as well as, to Murphy, the inanity of it.

McChord grinned wryly. 'Trappers carry rifles with them, or pistols. Anyone knows that. Need 'em to kill critters that're toe-caught. Need something small-bored so as not to mess up the pelt. You didn't bring one back with you accordin' to DeLaney. Then, too, your pictures showed an odd glint back in the brush and rhododendron that had to be a gun. This morning I rode out and found it.'

The cowboy got out his makings and twirled a cigarette, shards of tobacco falling on the counter in the process. That bothered Murphy too, a nagging little thing like a hangnail, but he held it in.

McChord stuck the cigarette in his mouth and struck a kitchen match to light it, his dark eyes staring at Murphy through the plume of sulphur. 'Where's Bowman's rifle?' he asked through a puff of smoke.

'What makes you think he had one?' the Sheriff parried tightly. They were dueling verbally and both of them knew it. Squared off like two dogs in an alley, sizing each other up with words. Murphy had the feeling that McChord, at least, was enjoying himself.

'Bowman always carried one. Winchester 30/30, I think.'

'You're guessing.'

'Am I?'

'Maybe he left it at the ranch.'

'Maybe.' McChord let it go, the words hanging in the air like a cloud, filling the silence as they watched each other. In the background Elaine cleared her throat uncomfortably.

'Was there a rifle in Bowman's scabbard?' McChord asked finally.

'I didn't see his gear,' Murphy told him, his mind racing back through its files, remembering Bowman cocking the rifle before riding into the hills. He felt like an

ass, a total ass, for not having thought of it. He hadn't even asked to see the cowboy's gear. 'I'll câll Bud.'

'Do that,' McChord said softly.

The phone call didn't take long. He talked briefly with the foreman of the Circle C, but he knew the answer long before Bud Walker voiced it. The rifle scabbard had been empty. Bud pointed out that it didn't mean much, though, since Bowman had the habit of leaving his trappings on the saddle all the time. He might not have taken the rifle, and all the dead cowboy's equipment had been shipped to his home. No, the man who'd packed it was out working, but Walker would question him about whether or not he had packed a Winchester. He'd call back this evening.

The phone call was a gesture, a simple attempt to salvage a little something from this whole mess. Murphy wanted a Mexican standoff, at least, but somehow felt he wasn't going to get it. That woodsrat sonofabitch was right. He was always right. Never made a mistake. He hung up the receiver and walked back to the counter. 'Walker said Bowman sometimes rode without the rifle. One of the men shipped his things home and he'll talk to him this evening and let me know.'

The dark eyes bored into his, hot, hard and unforgiving and Murphy felt a tendency to wince under the gaze.

'You talked to Bowman. Was the scabbard empty?'

The Sheriff felt the anger rising in him. Pressure. A hot wash spreading through him, like the buildup of a volcano. Who the hell did this goddam last-century bastard think he was talking to? A goddam kid? The volcano erupted.

'Empty or not,' Murphy snapped, 'what the hell is it to you? I'm the Sheriff in this goddam county!'

'Right on, Murph,' McChord grinned. 'You're the Sheriff, ain't you? Well, I got things to do an' no time to fool around here. Just thought you might be interested in the rifle, so I went down and got it. Curious, though, ain't it? I mean, who'd rip off a man's head and smash his rifle against a tree? Who'd slap another man around and stomp his fishing rod case?'

'A psychopath,' Murphy told him, getting his anger under control. 'Nothing else but.'

McChord ground out his cigarette in the ashtray, but he didn't bother to brush the crumbs of tobacco from the counter. 'Yeah,' he said, 'a real nut.' His grin was broad. 'Luck,' he added, and walked out, slamming the door again.

Murphy leaned on the counter for a long time after McChord stepped into the saddle and rode off. He wasn't thinking of anything much, except of possibly strangling Russ McChord. He'd never met a man who got under his skin quite as much as that loner did. He was waiting for him to make a mistake, just one. When he did, Murphy was going to be there. He'd told him that, but McChord had just grinned that same kind of wry smirk he usually wore. The cowboy had said that whenever he made a mistake it would be his last, and he didn't give a damn who saw that one. It wouldn't matter.

'He sure is a burr under your blanket,' Elaine said in a gentle tone.

'I'd like to kill that bastard.'

'That wouldn't look too good, Tom, a Sheriff killing a resident. Relax a little.'

'Relax? That's a laugh!'

'You'd better, darling. I'm afraid you're going to have Harry Backus in here before long, and you're going to have to be cool where he's concerned.'

'Oh, Jesus! I forgot about him too.'

'I thought you had, so I've put together a press release you can hand him.'

Elaine's voice was cool and he wondered about it. The woman was really remarkable in the simple efficient way she handled everything. While he blundered around on these murders, she always came up with answers and the solutions to whatever was vexing him. That in itself worried him. This wasn't like him at all, bungling things like this. His first impulse was to blame his clumsiness on his complicated personal life, the married man running around with his deputy-and-secretary routine. But he knew that wasn't it.

It was the case, and he knew it. When he tallied up all the facts of the two murders, coupled with Ernie Nye and the tracks, he was left with a strange conclusion he didn't want to face. Now McChord comes in and drops a broken rifle on the counter and everything falls

into a focus so sharp as to make a man want to run away and hide. Bigfoot! My God, an Indian lègend, a will-o-the-wisp going around killing people. He thought of Elaine and her cool, crisp logic and he wanted desperately to argue with her, to have her convince him that a nut was doing the killings.

'Well?' Elaine jolted him from his thoughts.

'Huh?'

'You're a million miles away, darling. Thinking about the case?'

He became aware that his face was tight. Brackets had formed around his mouth and his eyebrows had furled down into a crouch over his eyes. He forced a grin. 'Yes, I guess so.'

'Any conclusions?'

'Only that it doesn't make sense,' he lied. 'None of it does.'

Elaine pressed the eraser of a pencil against her full lower lip and nodded slightly. 'That rifle leaves out the bear, doesn't it?'

'As far as I'm concerned, it sure does.' He paused, then began enlarging upon the lie he'd begun. 'I think it all boils down to a psycho. The question is, *who?* Who among the jovial skiers at the lodge, or this sleepy little town, could be the killer, and what the hell does he have against guns?'

'He?'

'You don't know any *she's* capable of ripping off a head, do you?'

Elaine grinned. 'Nope. I don't know any *he's* that could do it, either.'

'What the hell's that supposed to mean?'

'Now don't get angry, darling. I'm not trying to bait you, but I am trying to make you think a little harder. We have a trapper and a cowboy dead and a drunk with a fractured skull. Totally unrelated except for one thing. Guns.'

'Ernie Nye didn't have a gun,' he protested weakly.

'He had a fishing rod in an aluminium case that might have *looked* like a gun.'

'Only to an idiot,' Murphy snorted. Or a Bigfoot, his mind whispered.

'Maybe so, but that's the common element you've been

looking for. You won't get anything from the files to connect any of those men—except the fact that they were all armed.'

'So who's my killer? Some psycho from the Sierra Club or a misfit ecologist?'

Elaine shook her head. 'Darling, you've probably forgotten more than I'll ever know about this business of detecting, but remember Sherlock Holmes? He said something to the effect that if you eliminate the impossible, the improbable must be the truth. You haven't eliminated the improbable.'

'And that is?'

'The sasquatch.'

'Oh, Lord, my own secretary!' He knew she was right, as she always was, but he felt compelled to fight it. 'To think that I love you dearly and you're going wacky!'

'Eliminate it then, dear. Eliminate the impossible.'

'You mean eliminate the myth, don't you? There isn't a shred of scientific proof that such beings exist and you want me to go chase one and arrest it for murder.'

'Look at the facts, Tom, and what do you find? A harmless trapper and a drifting cowboy. What reason would anyone have for killing them, for stalking them through the snow, tearing them apart and smashing their rifles? What reason would anyone have for clobbering Ernie Nye and jumping on his fishing rod case? Even a psycho who hated guns with a passion wouldn't be fool enough to jump on a fishing rod.'

Murphy felt like a deflated balloon. She was right. He was also right. But it was totally ridiculous. 'A minute ago you went along with me on the psycho idea. Now you're jumped onto a legendary—'

'A minute ago I hadn't seen that rifle. *Hands* picked that gun up and smashed it against a tree. Not the claws of a bear, nor the hands of a psycho. Why would a psycho—even granting he was some weirdo who hated guns—tramp around through the mountains in the snow just to knock off two guys with rifles, when he could do the same thing right here?'

'You could be right,' he admitted, 'but I'll tell you the problem with your theory. I'm a cop, honey, and as such I'm under the orders of the county commissioners. I make reports to them on civil actions, traffic and crime.

I have two homicides on my hands and they're going to want a report. You know what they're going to say when I hand them a sasquatch story? You'll be working for a new boss in a week.'

Elaine smiled sweetly. 'I'll still love you,' she said, teasing. 'Even when you're unemployed.'

CHAPTER NINE

BRANDY was getting tired when McChord kneed him around the final bend of the rutted dirt road that led to his cabin. He paused momentarily, seeing the Volvo parked near the door. Carlene was there. He gigged the horse lightly with a spurred boot and moved him toward the barn.

The cabin was low-slung, everything on a floor plan that measured a mere twelve by twenty feet, with a crawl-type loft that served as a storage area. There was no electricity and a small pitcher pump supplied water for the sink. He had grudgingly set a couple of windows in the walls for light. Behind the cabin was the woodshed and the small barn, with the breaking corral off to one side. He'd attached the corral to the barn door so Brandy could go in and out when he felt like it.

McChord liked the place. He was proud of it, in fact. He didn't own much more than fifteen acres, but it was enough to do what he wanted to do and still keep the town of Lodgepole at a distance. There were stalls in the barn for a couple of young Herefords, he'd bought at auction, and a double handful of chickens scratched around the yard and through the hay.

The place kind of reminded him of Charlie Russell's drawings of the old-time cattle ranches. That had been his intention when he built it, and he could see no logical reason for changing the motif to anything more modern.

At the barn he stepped down and led the gelding inside to peel off the saddle before turning him into his box stall. He forked some hay into the manger, added a quart of oats to the feed box, then headed for the house. In the cabin, Carlene was pouring a cup of coffee.

'Morning, honey.' She set the coffee on the table and poured another for herself.

'Morning.' McChord dropped his hat onto a peg near the door and shrugged his way out of the sheepskin coat. He hung it beside the hat and sat down to drink the coffee.

'Hear anything more about the killings?' she asked.

He watched her settle into the chair on the other side of the table, a pretty girl, not yet twenty-five, and wondered what in hell she saw in him. She wore her sandy hair cropped short, and no makeup. The effect was a kind of clean radiance that he liked. He didn't like her waitress uniform.

McChord shrugged. 'The Sheriff doesn't know anything.'

'Well, it has the ski lodge talking,' she said brightly. 'A psychopathic killer up here. That's far out. I mean, that's what you might expect in Los Angeles, but not here.'

'Why not?'

'Well, crime up here doesn't amount to much, does it? A few traffic tickets or something.'

He sipped at the coffee. 'City people come up here.' he pointed out. 'They bring the crime with them.'

Carlene's hazel eyes studied him intently. 'You don't like city people?'

'No.'

'You like me, don't you? I'm from the city.'

He nodded. 'I like you.'

'But you don't love me.'

He had been staring into the depths of the coffee cup. Now he looked up, his eyes meeting hers. 'Go to hell, Carlene,' he said gently.

'Well, a girl likes to hear something like that once in a while.'

McChord began rolling a cigarette methodically, not bothering to filch one from her pack that lay open on the table. 'Find someone who'll tell you that, then.'

'I thought *you* might.'

'You thought wrong.'

She lit her own cigarette with an imitation gold lighter. Through the smoke, she said, 'I don't think that's too much to ask of a man, but you never say anything like that. It bothers me sometimes. You don't say you love me, you don't say you hate me. If I don't show up, you don't call me. If I'm here it's fine, and if I'm not, that's fine too.'

'You're here because you want to be here.' He finished the cigarette and lit it with a match.

'That's enough for you, huh?'

'It'll do.'

'Maybe it isn't enough for me, though. Did you ever think of that?'

'Yeah.' He drained his coffee and stood up to get another cup. 'Yeah, I've thought of it. I've thought about all of it, all the ramifications and all the problems. I like things just the way they are.'

'Russell, love is one kind of creek you can't wade across. Sooner or later you step into a hole and get in over your head.'

'What the hell's that supposed to mean?'

'It means that you can't meet a person, make love to her and live with her without either loving or hating her.'

'I do.'

'Sometimes you exasperate me!'

'And you exasperate me when you get on this kind of kick. I don't like it. When we met we both wanted to get laid, so we did. I enjoy your company when you're not talking like a nitwit, but I enjoy the kind of life I'm living more. I spent a long time thinking all this out, what I wanted to do, and I'm not going to change it because some waitress in a ski lodge restaurant wants me to tell lies to her.'

'Russ—'

'I ain't through yet. I like it here. I drink when I feel like it and I ride out on Brandy when I feel like it. I don't need anyone here when I leave, and I don't need anyone here when I get back. I don't want someone around asking me where I'm going, how long I'll be and where I've been when I finally get back. I don't need a mother and I don't need a help-mate—whatever that is. I don't need someone hanging up curtains, and thinking of the pitter-patter of little feet nauseates me.

'I got no strings on you and I don't want any. If you want to get laid and can't find one of those college kids to do it, come on down. If you don't, stay away. I want my life free, and I want yours free also. If you don't like freedom, find someone else to imprison you.'

In the silence they both sipped their coffee and smoked. Carlene seemed to be pondering.

'Well,' she mused finally, 'that certainly told me off, didn't it? You love me horizontally, but not vertically,

huh? I don't think I've ever had *that* kind of relationship before.'

'No, you probably haven't. You've probably had a lot of men in love with you. Maybe they still are, for all the good it does them. I don't work that way, that's all. No man needs to build a forest fire just to get warm.'

'They say it's better to have loved and lost . . .'

'That's horseshit, and you know it. The world is full of horseshit, and society will be happy to shove it down your throat if you open your mouth.'

'Ah-ha,' she smiled wryly, 'you're a rebel against society, a half-assed monk cloistered in the mountains.'

'That's me,' he grinned, discarding the empty coffee cup for a bottle of Jack Daniels in the cupboard. 'Rebel against society. I guess that's as good a pigeonhole as any, since everyone seems to have one.' He got out two glasses and poured a couple of fingers' worth in each. 'Here, have a drink. Drunk might be another slot to stick me in—or eccentric. Oddball, maybe, since you ought to be rich to be eccentric. Who gives a damn? I'm freer than I've ever been in my life.'

'Until these murders came up, huh?'

He sipped the whiskey. 'They don't bother me.'

'No? Then why'd you ride out this morning?' She paused and sipped her own drink. 'Why have you been riding out to Elkhorn's place, and the Sheriff's office?'

'You've been spying on me.'

'Maybe. I know you're interested in these killings. It's because of the sasquatch, right?'

'Sasquatch? You been talking to Moses?'

She shook her head. 'It's all over town that Thelma Plankenhorn saw a sasquatch last night.'

He snorted derisively. 'Thelma sees sasquatches and Fred sees flying saucers. They make a great pair.'

'Moses Elkhorn says it, too.'

'Hell, he's an old man reverting back to the legends of the Indians. Poking fun at the whites, maybe.'

'What do you think, Russell?'

He polished off the whiskey and poured more before he answered her. 'Who knows? What about the tracks?'

'You haven't heard?'

He shook his head. 'I was down on Willow Creek this morning. The Sheriff didn't say anything about it.'

Carlene outlined the story of the tracks briefly, adding that Tom Murphy thought they were the tracks of a running man since the drifting snow had obscured most of their outline. When she had finished, the silence dropped back over the kitchen again while McChord thought about it. He swirled the whiskey in his glass, staring at the little beads of liquor that clung to the sides. He was letting it all run through his head and he didn't particularly like the way it was adding up.

'What do you figure?' Carlene asked, looking at the frown working on his features. 'I know something is rambling through your mind.'

He smashed out what was left of his cigarette and rolled another one with slow, deliberate movements while he talked. 'I dunno. Things just don't add up the way they ought to. Not for ordinary crime, that is.'

'You mean Burack's head?'

'Well, yeah. That, and Ernie's fishing rod case. Then there's Burack's busted rifle and Cal Bowman's missing 30/30. Now you tell me Thelma Plankenhorn saw tracks through her yard, and last night she woke Fred up and told him there was a bear running around town.'

She watched him closely. 'What busted rifle?'

'Burack's. The rifle had been smashed against a tree, thrown about twenty yards into the brush.'

'Did you tell Tom Murphy?'

'Yeah.'

'It adds up to sasquatch, doesn't it?'

'Shit.'

'Don't "shit" me, Russell McChord. Thelma and Fred are right, aren't they? They were sasquatch tracks and the bear she saw *was* a sasquatch, wasn't it?'

He lit the cigarette and squinted at her through the wash of smoke swirling about his face. 'Sasquatches don't kill people. They're a very timid animal—if you can call them animals—and very few people have even seen them. They . . .'

'You're evading the question, Russell. That's typical of you. But let's not play games, huh?'

'Games? Listen, Carlene, this is pretty serious stuff. Suppose, just suppose, the killer is a sasquatch. What then?'

She finished her drink and shrugged. 'Kill him, I guess. That's what always happens, isn't it?'

'Fine, but just how are you going to kill something nobody ever sees? Christ! They've been looking for these damned things for years and all they've got to show for it is a bunch of tracks and a handful of sightings.'

'All the facts point that way, don't they?'

'They seem to. Oh, hell, yes! Everything I've seen or heard so far points to a sasquatch being the killer. What's the sense of kidding myself, or you for that matter? I guess I don't want to believe it any more than Tom Murphy wants to believe it.'

'Murphy thinks it's a sasquatch?'

'He didn't say so. In fact, he's probably fighting the idea more than I am, but eventually he'll have to start acting like a cop and put two and two together. He's milking that psycho angle all he can, ignoring facts, stumbling over clues. Not like him at all.'

Carlene looked puzzled. 'But why? Why not admit . . .?'

'Why? What the hell do you suppose'll happen to him as a Sheriff if he comes out in the newspapers and says a sasquatch has been killing off the population of Lodgepole? The Bigfoot is more myth than fact. No one in their right mind is going to believe a story like that. They'll run him right out of office. He might as well say a man from Mars did it.'

'Well then, what do you propose?'

He blinked at her. 'Me? What the hell have *I* got to do with it? I ain't the Sheriff.'

'You're a citizen,' she protested, 'as well as being the best woodsman in the country.'

'It ain't my business, and I ain't a citizen. And I'm not sticking my neck out where some half-man, half-ape, standing eight feet tall in his bare feet is gonna rip it off.'

'But you know the country better than anyone except old Elkhorn. You want *him* to go?'

'Don't be stupid. Besides I don't think this will take a woodsman. I'm beginning to think that any man walking within a mile of that bastard, toting a rifle, has a chance to plug him. This particular Bigfoot will come to bait.'

'You'd still stand a better chance than Murphy.'

McChord shrugged, finished his whiskey and poured

some more. He held the bottle out to Carlene and she shook her head firmly, her eyes boring into his.

'Why are you like this?' she asked gently. 'You live in this cabin with no electricity, no running water, and you don't own a car or a pickup. You ride a horse wherever you go, drink all the time—'

'—and,' he cut in, 'limp from a chunk of shrapnel, mind my own business, and wander through the woods. So what?'

'So it isn't natural, Russell. You've turned your back on practically everything civilized, as though you might have been cut up by something. Yet you aren't bitter about anything. You never get mad. Why?'

'Maybe my mother was scared by something.'

'No, I don't think it has anything to do with that. I don't understand you at all. I wonder if you do yourself.'

He shrugged, mildly annoyed at her probing, and swigged down the Jack Daniels. 'I like the woods and the mountains. I like log cabins and I prefer horses to pickup trucks. I came up here to get away from smog, industry, punching time-clocks, fighting traffic jams.'

'There's more to it than that, and you know it!'

'Maybe.'

'No maybe about it! A man who comes up here, lives like you do and likes the country is one thing; but you drink too much, you smoke too much, you have no damned emotion in you at all . . . and you're too damned arrogant!'

'Well, now,' he grinned, 'I guess you've covered most of my virtues. You want to kick around my faults?'

'No.' Tears were welling in her hazel eyes and she was embarrassed by it. McChord could see that she wasn't as tough as she had thought she was. 'No, I guess not.'

He watched her get up and reach for her coat. After she had struggled into it, she turned back to him a confused look on her face, mingled with anger and frustration.

'You don't want me,' she said softly. 'You don't need me or anything.'

'Maybe . . .'

'No, shut up! I don't want you to say a word! When I met you, I'd never known anyone like you. You know, Russ, you've got it all. You really have. You're good-

looking, strong, gentle and totally self-sufficient. Someone a girl could really cuddle up to on cold winter nights. Someone to fall in love—'

'Carlene—'

'Shut up, I said! The trouble is, Russ, that's all you are. Inside, you've got no emotion. No hate, no love. Just emptiness. You . . . you're like a robot.' The tears that were welling began to slide down her cheeks. 'Nothing but a fucking robot, and I can't handle it!'

She turned and slammed out of the cabin.

McChord poured another dollop of whiskey into the glass and listened to her start the Volvo and back it around, the wheels whirring in the snow of the road as she headed back toward the village.

That had been coming for a long time, he decided. It was finally over, the way it is always over eventually. Ten weeks, ten months, ten years. Nothing lasts forever, he knew. He'd always known. He hadn't wanted it to be this way, but it was. She was different from the others he'd known, but deep down she still yearned for all the things a woman needed. He chewed his lower lip and thought about the collapse of their relationship. While he thought he looked down into the glass of whiskey in his hand.

Then, without anger, he slammed it against the far wall.

CHAPTER TEN

CARLENE BLOCKER swung the Volvo into a parking slot at the front of the Pine Tree Inn and got out without bothering to lock it. With today and tomorrow off from her job at the ski lodge restaurant and the total collapse of her relationship with Russ, she had the overwhelming desire to get smashed, and she didn't particularly give a damn if it was only a little after noon. The way she drank, it wouldn't take long.

The Pine Tree was almost devoid of life. Frank was behind the long, dark bar as usual, talking to a stranger in rather low tones. They both glanced at her as she stepped in and closed the door. She smiled at both of them, asked Frank to make her a seven and seven, then settled in a somewhat darkened corner.

She liked the tavern, and the people who frequented the place, but more than anything she liked Matilda because the artist had seemed to put so much more into the painting than just nudity. It had depth and sensitivity that had made her popular with both men and women; her almost totally naked body, while attractive and well done, seemed almost completely overshadowed by her face and the way she lay composed and pensive on the bed. Frank had told her that it had been painted before the first World War by a young man who had been killed in France, and that the model had probably been his mistress. The painting was signed Ben, in a small corner of the life-sized canvas, but no one knew anything about him or if he had ever painted anything else.

She was many things to many people, from the drunken young logger who had said that 'she looks like she just got screwed,' to the older woman who mentioned that 'she has the qualities of a modern Madonna.' To Carlene, Matilda's contemplation always seemed neither sensual nor spiritual, but rather the wistfulness of a woman pondering the logic of a world that would tear her lover from her to slaughter him in France.

Whatever she was, whoever she had been, the artist

had created a canvas that lived and would continue to live. It would be a mirror, seventy years old now, in which both men and women would see themselves reflected.

'Little early for drinking, ain't it, Carlene?' asked Frank, setting her drink on the table of her booth.

She liked Frank and his quiet ways. His nosiness that reminded everyone of a gossipy old woman had never bothered her, since here in the Pine Tree he was the editor of a verbal newspaper that the residents counted on.

'I feel like getting drunk. You ever feel like that?'

'Occasionally. You have a fight with Russ?'

She sipped her drink and laughed mirthlessly. 'Who *ever* has a fight with Russ McChord?'

'I thought so,' Frank mused with a slight smile. 'Well, if you want to get loaded, this is the place to do it.'

He walked back to the bar and poured another beer for the stranger. The newcomer, a tall, heavily-built blond, wore the type of clothes usually seen in the mountains, but their newness and attention to style gave him the appearance of a model stepping out of a sales catalog. The heavy plaid logger shirt had been tucked into an almost brand-new pair of Levis. The straps on his Shenandoah boots were an item that anyone up here would have cut off, if they would even consider buying such things in the first place. The expensive-looking lambskin coat he'd tossed over the bar only vaguely bore a resemblance to the worn, dirt-smudged sheep-skin coat that McChord and the other out-doorsmen wore.

She dismissed him as not only a stranger, but a dude.

She had an urge to go south, perhaps back to Los Angeles or San Diego. Any place would be better than here, at least now. She remembered that her original reasons for coming here had been focused on the mountains and the forests, but somehow all that had gone stale. There were no jobs up here except for the kind she had now, and her parents were forever asking her, in their letters, what a girl with her education was doing in this kind of place. At first she had written them about fresh air and pure water, but of late she simply didn't answer their questions.

Until now she hadn't been sure just what she wanted.

At least, that had been the answer that surfaced from deep inside whenever she bothered to dig it up; but a woman could only handle superficial answers to questions for a little while. Sooner or later, if one spent enough time alone, stark, honest answers began to form in the mind, and sometimes they weren't pretty.

Like now.

Now that she had broken off with Russ, she could see deep inside exactly what it was that she wanted, and it was a disturbing insight when she turned it over in her mind. She wanted someone to love her, to make love to her and hold her, and there was no way Russell McChord could fill that bill. Oh, when they made love he was gentle and considerate; the trouble was that he didn't love her, and that made a big difference. She'd tried. God, how she had tried to wring something resembling emotion from him, but it had been impossible. Yet for a brief time that had intrigued her.

The challenge, perhaps.

She smirked into the few swallows of liquor that remained amid the ice. Challenge? Sometimes a slight challenge isn't bad. A girl can generally help her man solve whatever problem is nagging at him, sort of iron out the little mental kinks that gnarl him up from time to time. But McChord? No way. He was a totally different ball game than anyone she'd ever seen, and he never gave an inch. It bothered her because, as the Chinese had said, a tree that doesn't bend must break.

For a while, she'd thought it had been Nam, but then she had finally discarded that idea. Parents? Maybe a broken home? Possibly some girl jilting him? She'd run the gamut of every problem she'd ever heard of and tried to tack it to McChord. And every time, whatever label she would affix to him would eventually crumble and fall away, leaving the same enigma she had known for months. She was no closer to understanding him today than she had been the first night they'd met.

'Drink?'

Carlene looked up. The dude was standing at the edge of the table, a beer in one hand and a seven and seven in the other. She said, 'Thank you,' because she didn't know what else to say. He had a nice smile, she decided. Open and friendly.

'May I sit down? That's why I bought the drink, of course, so I could sit down and talk to you and ask you to dinner.'

'You certainly get right to the point, don't you?' She had to smile. Both of them had heard most of the lines, so the dude hadn't bothered. Maybe, she thought, with him there won't be any game-playing.

He settled on the other side of the booth. He was good-looking all right, Carlene saw, even more so at close range than at the bar. His face was square with a ruddy complexion and features that looked as though they'd been roughed in with an axe. He looked like a professional linebacker and his eyes were as blue as a Nordic fjord.

'I'm Glenn Brock,' he said finally. 'Just got into town. I don't know a soul except the Sherriff, and I don't like him very well.'

'My name's Carlene Blocker. Why don't you like Tom Murphy?'

'Because he doesn't like the Bigfoot. Calls it a damned Indian legend. At least, I think that was the phrase he used.' He sipped his beer. 'Anyhow, Harry is mad at him because he won't say anything about the murders, and I'll be mad at him if it turns out *not* to be a sasquatch.'

Carlene chuckled at him and sipped her drink. 'Who is Harry?' she managed finally.

'Harry Backus. A friend of mine. Works for the *Medford Chronical.* He came here on vacation a few days ago and called me when the killings seemed to have a Bigfoot appearance to them. The Sheriff disappointed both of us, though.'

'Oh, the reporter. I've seen him at the lodge.' She paused. 'Well, you can hardly expect the Sheriff to go along with the sasquatch story, can you?'

'No, I guess not.' His blue eyes sought hers. '*Is* there a Bigfoot up here, Carlene?'

'I don't know,' she lied. 'The deaths of those two men were rather weird, but—'

Glenn held up three fingers. 'Ernie Nye died early this morning at Medford General.'

'That's probably what's making Sheriff Murphy madder than anything. I think he was counting on Nye identifying whoever beat him up. He didn't say anything, did he?'

'According to Harry, who got the story from the office, Nye only regained a kind of semi-consciousness during the night. His language had to be edited for the paper, and for pretty ears like yours.'

'I'm no little girl,' Carlene smiled, 'and my ears are quite grown up as well. What did he say?'

'He said, and I quote, "fucking skunk," unquote.'

'Well,' she admitted, 'that sounds like Ernie, but I don't know what it could mean.'

He shrugged his massive shoulders slightly. 'It didn't mean much to the Sheriff, either, but it's something to to be remembered. I think it's valuable.'

'In what way?'

'You have to be crazy, like me. I don't know how you want to interpret these killings in your own mind, but I choose to label them sasquatch, based primarily on what I've heard. In my opinion, Ernie Nye said what he did because of the strong odor that usually accompanies the Bigfoot. Looking at it from a purely objective angle, as our Sheriff might do, he may well have meant a *real* skunk. The trick, naturally, will be to figure out exactly what he did mean.'

'And just how do you go about doing that?'

'Unfortunately, Miss Blocker, I'm a biologist and not a detective.'

'How does a biologist become interested in sasquatches? That isn't exactly on the curriculum, is it?'

He grinned at her and finished his drink. 'Hurry up and drink yours, and I'll get us another one. Otherwise, I'll never be able to get you drunk and take advantage of you.'

Carlene smiled and drank. She found that she liked this big dude. Glenn Brock had an easy, friendly way about him that seemed wildly refreshing after the months with McChord. It wasn't so much *what* he said, it was his way of delivering the lines that made her feel comfortable. No pushing or trying to put a time limit on his quest. Just being himself. She figured she would go to bed with him before too long. It was one of those things, and she felt sure that both of them knew it.

She finished her seven and seven and Brock got a

couple more drinks from Frank. When he had settled down again, he answered her question.

'I have Casimir Lambert to thank for my interest in the sasquatch,' he told her. 'Being one of the vast majority of the American poverty class, I usually had to work all summer to afford school all winter. A buddy got me a job on Lambert's salmon boat out of Bolla Coola, and he and I hit it off right from the start. Cas was a full blooded Tlingit Indian, and a veritable storehouse of sasquatch lore. The idea of these giants fascinated me, and I dug into libraries after I got back to the States. I'm convinced that they exist and that we will eventually learn about them, and probably become more knowledgeable about ourselves through them.'

'We've never captured one, though?'

'No, but then I don't advocate capturing or killing them. What good would that do?'

She sipped her drink and smiled. 'Well, don't you scientific types have to put them in cages, inject them with hormones and dissect them, and all that?'

'God forbid,' he chuckled. 'I think, my pretty one, that you have a rather warped view of what science is all about. Of course, we all have our areas of interest. Harry, for example, doesn't give a damn about the Bigfoot. He wants a story, pure and simple. A hunter may want to kill one because it's never been done before. A zoologist, or even a hybrid biologist like me, would prefer to study the critter in its natural surroundings.

'You see, Carlene, the important thing is knowledge of the species. In this case, I think that killing one of them would be crude, irresponsible, and more suited to men of the last century than to us.'

'I see.' She shook a cigarette from a partially crumpled pack and Glenn lit it. 'This sasquatch,' she said through a haze of bluish smoke, 'is an animal, right?'

'Technically, you and I are animals, but I see what you are driving at. Is he homo sapiens, or pongid, or simioid? Who knows?' He shrugged. 'There you have me, and the rest of the scientific world as well. There just isn't enough scientific data available for a positive identification, but there is—even through the observations of unskilled people—enough information to make educated guesses.

'You see, if the Bigfoot *were* strictly an animal, his behavior would be predictable. Unfortunately, the Bigfoot is totally unpredictable. He seems to be an exceptionally intelligent giant who is highly nomadic, extremely shy—'

'What d'you think?' she cut in quickly.

'Well, in my attempts at being scientific, I have a tendency to be a little reserved until all the facts are in, but in view of what I've read about them, I lean toward the human aspect rather than the animal.'

'The missing-link theory?'

'Hardly. I don't think any serious scientific theory on the Bigfoot has been advanced as yet; at least, I haven't read it. I have my own theories. Basically, I think that the sasquatch is a form of man, early man, that has never undergone the evolutionary changes that would . . . well, modernize it. Like the shark or the turtle.'

'Is that possible?'

'Sure, why not? The casts of footprints of Bigfoot bear a remarkable resemblance to the prints of Neanderthal Man found in a cave in Italy.'

'You think he's Neanderthal?' Carlene was shocked.

'No, of course not. I merely said the print is similar. The footprints of early man were vastly different from modern man, and the sasquatch's looks primitive. You've heard of the social backwash?'

'No.'

'Well, take this country. During the settlement of it, the pioneers followed the line of least resistance. Down the Ohio to the Mississippi, then up the Missouri. They had the Oregon and the Santa Fe trails, and a few others. When civilization came along, it too followed the early paths, creating pockets of isolation that are just now beginning to catch up. The process is what gave us the hillbilly.

'I believe that it is the same with man and his progression from the caves and mud huts of prehistory. Perhaps the sasquatch is an evolutionary backwash that has never needed to catch up to the rest of mankind.'

'Is that natural? I mean, for an entire type of man to resist progress?'

'I think so. You know, to a great degree, we resist most forms of progress, even though we're forced to accept it.

The boys on Madison Avenue shove it down our throats, but clinging to the past is very important to us, because we resist progress, I think we have a tendency to be afraid of space travel and atomic energy, even though the future may prove us wrong. Perhaps the sasquatch fears the use of fire among his kind to an even greater extent than we fear space travel.'

'And so, because of fear, he has never progressed beyond the Neanderthal Age?'

'Right, except that he hasn't gone much beyond Louis Leakey's African type in Alduvai Gorge . . . at least, not in tool use. In temperament he is quite different. There are documents, more or less factual, that suggest that the sasquatch, or, if you want to be scientific, *homo nocturnus,* does use some form of tools, such as rocks and pointed sticks. While he doesn't apparently use fire, he seems to have the ability to weave blankets of roots and bark and apparently communicates with his own kind in a sort of language.'

Carlene finished her drink, and since there was no one else at the bar, Frank was right on hand to get them both another. She looked seriously at Glenn. 'What d'you think?'

'I don't think he's an animal. If he is, he's totally different from anything we've yet seen or studied. What worries me is that before science has a chance to study him, a bunch of idiots will kill off the species and we'll be studying another doo-doo bird or something.'

The liquor was beginning to reach her and had created a tingling sensation that fluttered through her legs. Occasionally, watching Brock's handsome face, her eyes would slide out of focus. 'The only idiot I know up here capable of catching a Bigfoot is Russell McChord, but Moses Elkhorn could tell you a lot.'

'I'd like to meet them both.'

Carlene shook her head and lit another cigarette. 'You wouldn't like to meet McChord, but you will. I'm sure of that. You can meet Moses tonight. His cabin is a mile down the road to Medford, on the left. He sits up all night anyhow, and he's crazy, but take him a bottle and he'll talk.'

'Crazy? You sure?'

'Sure I'm sure. I'm an expert on insanity, because I'm

from Los Angeles. It's a very serious thing down there. Everyone's nuts. Wave it around like a banner.'

'Tell me about McChord, Carlene.'

'McChord?' She swallowed more highball. 'He's neat. Has all the answers of how to live in spite of the Twentieth Century, *sans* women, *sans* machinery . . . well, the list goes on and on. He's a cowboy, living off a trapline and a pension from the Army for stepping on a mine or something. Loner. That's what he is, only he's pushed the term loner to the ultimate.'

'But he's a woodsman, right?'

'He's that, all right,' she said through a cloud of smoke. 'Top grade, from what I've heard. Track a damned snake through a swamp, or a fly up a stone cliff.'

'You don't seem to like him, Carlene.' He paused. 'Or is it because you *do* like him that you're tearing him down?'

'Me?' She blinked owlishly at him. 'Me? Tear him down?'

'It isn't what you said, it's how.'

She waved a hand and cleared away the smoke. 'I don't want to talk about him, or the damned sasquatches. Besides, I'm gettin' a bit loaded. I think I better go home.'

She stood up and lurched. Brock caught her, and without a word, steered her toward the door. Carlene leaned heavily against him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

He reined Brandy in on the hill just beyond town and swung in the saddle to look back on the hamlet clustered around the crossroads. From the rise he could see Carlene's Volvo parked in front of the Pine Tree Inn. He whirled the horse around in the wallow of snow as if to go down, then held him back. He simply sat there, relaxed in the saddle. The sorrel danced under him, snorting and tossing his head.

Despite the brilliant midday sunlight that splashed against the houses of the town and warmed the air, McChord felt a chill seep through his heavy sheepskin coat. Thoughts of Carlene Blocker beat at him. Maybe he should have lied to her, told her he loved her. Maybe he actually did, but then he had been in love before. Everyone had at one time or another, and it was an emotion he had come to treat with suspicion. Love had the tendency to peel away the veneer of toughness men wore like a protective aura. He distrusted anything that would strip him of his armor. Macho cult, right? He grinned at the thought. Yeah, that was the latest axe grinding by civilised man. Down with all that prehistoric emotion. He snorted heavily, in disgust, relaxed into his manliness, and felt comfortable.

Yet how far did a man push it? To what end did manhood and identity extend? Was it all really just games, like the love thing? The complexity of his lost relationship with Carlene bore down on him with a weight that was like the crush of a subway crowd. He wanted her around most of the time, needed her badly a lot . . . and yet . . . he was afraid of her. Wouldn't that be a laugh for the boys at the Pine Tree, to know Russ McChord feared *anything*?

It wasn't her, exactly. He was afraid of what she stood for and what she would rip out of his life just by simply being a woman. In exchange for her love, she would need electricity, running water, another house, insurance, and God knows what else. He would have to go to work, and so would have to leave the mountains, because there

was no work up here. He would rejoin civilization, complete with the workaday world, the unemployment, the struggles and frustrations inherent in modern society. The wilderness would be gone and the arts and skills he knew worse than useless. All that he was would have to be shoved aside, pigeon-holed in the classification of trivia. What the hell good did it do a man to understand the habits of deer, bear and mountain sheep in the heart of Seattle or San Francisco? Of what use is the ability to break horses in Los Angeles? What would marksmanship mean in a dearmed land?

There was the hell of it. He would lose too damned much in the trade. He would have to swap fresh air for smog, freedom for the confinement of the city and society, forests for the blazing heat of asphalt and concrete. Then, providing he had worked faithfully at his job for an entire year, he would be granted two weeks' vacation. He could then load the car, race like crazy through the traffic and clutch a few days of what he had once known before plodding back to the drudgery of an inane existence.

That was part of the pain. The other part was that his world was disappearing even now, disintegrating while he watched. The life he now lived, and loved, was swiftly becoming a thing of the past, and he knew he was going to lose in the end. In his lifetime he knew that all the things he wanted most would vanish in a jumbled confusion as Howard Johnson and his ilk marched with blithe indifference into what was left of the wild.

The grizzly were already gone, along with the Dall sheep. A parade of animals no longer moved through the forest. Adapt or die. That too was one of nature's laws. Adapt, die or move on. He didn't like the way it sounded, but it was true. His way of living would not last any more than the life of the Indian had lasted. Just as the stone age of the Indian had to give way to the mechanization of the whites, so would his lifestyle fall to what was known as progress.

The only defense of himself, he knew, lay in his ridicule of society and its stupidity, He was, after all, a man, not a reactor. The army had been an oversimplification of society, a group of numbers marching in files, dressing alike, looking alike, surrendering all identity to the sys-

tem that marched unfailingly toward whatever objective other men set up. And finished, he had become one of a vast army of unknown soldiers walking around.

Was that what society meant? To become part of another vast army of the unknown? That appealed to him in the same way as the security of the grave.

He saw the door of the tavern open and the two of them come out, Carlene leaning against the man. He installed her in the passenger's side, then got behind the wheel, and the Volvo moved off along the snow-edged road toward the ski lodge.

McChord pulled Brandy around a bit too hard, whirling the horse to face the stretches of forest. Face set, he dug in his spurs and bucked the gelding through a drift and onto a cleared stretch that went toward the north. Speed increased the sting of the cold, but the horse was in good shape and wanted to run off the oats he had consumed. McChord let him go, content to feel the surge of powerful flesh between his legs, the diamond-like spray of fine snow boiling up into the sunlight as the horse slammed his way across the open.

Damn the woman, he thought. Damn the town, the sheriff and everything in it! If the old way goes, I go with it! When the horse goes, so do I!

Later, his desire for speed sated, he slowed Brandy to an easy walk, letting him pick his way through an area littered with rock. Tom Murphy had not yet come up with Bowman's rifle, and while McChord wasn't exactly interested in showing up the Sheriff again, he was curious as to whether the Winchester had been smashed the way old man Burack's .22 had been. He'd learned from Bud Walker that Bowman had been ambushed near a place called Halfway Ridge, where a ledge-like path hooked itself around the face of a cliff.

McChord knew the area well enough. Halfway Ridge had once been a mountain that sloped down into the tumbled valley of Willow Creek. Eons ago an earthquake had sheered a slice off the granite base and tumbled it down into the valley in a crumpled slide of rock and dirt. The process had opened vein-like fissures, narrow little caves and a kind of natural stone path that angled up along the face of the slope. A horse was useless

on the path, but it was a place that the Circle C hands usually searched, since stray cattle sometimes got themselves tangled up in the rocks of the upper slope. Occasionally they were found at the bottom of the fifty-foot cliff, below the path, where they had stumbled into crumpled heaps on the stones. At this time of year, McChord knew there would be very few boulders thrusting through the snow. Facing the weather, the cliff always contained a built-up slant of snow that had been blown against the side of the ridge in a kind of primitive ski run.

Obviously Bowman had thought the cattle he was looking for might have slid down the slope and become trapped in the snow. McChord could imagine the cowboy cursing at the thought and wondering just how in hell he'd ever get them out if they were in there. Well, McChord thought, that was one problem Bowman had not had to face.

Riding the four of five miles to the ridge, McChord felt a sense of peace pervading him. Brandy's tracks were the only sign of life in the entire vastness of the silent country. Below the slope of the hills he was traveling, Willow Creek twisted sharply, half buried in places by snow and ice, and bright with sun-spangled ripples in other spots. Like a snake, he thought, partially hidden by the cover of the snow. Beyond the creek was the heavy forest of lodgepole, lifting gently toward the treeline, then sharply cresting into the rugged, snow-laden heights of the Cascade Range. On his left was another rise of hills—grasslands buried under the veneer of snow and dotted with clots of pine and scrub, broken occasionally by the hump of a white-laced granite rock.

It was tall country and he loved it, felt easy with its many moods—the silence of the winter, dead and cold; the wild lashing of spring freshets sending their torrents of melted snow racing down into the rivers with the splash of sunlight dancing and sparkling as they tumbled. Later there would be the green of new grass springing into life and the streams would be graced with the timid deer drinking in the early morning haze and bounding off into the woods at the sight of him and the horse. There were the storms, massive gatherings of ragged cumulus clouds frowning darkly on the valleys, grum-

bling and slashing the dust-laden air with shattering blades of lightning. The dust would bounce in the first volley of the rain, or maybe the sting of hailstones of a varied size and impact, forcing riders to seek shelter in the trees and rocks until the onslaught had whipped itself off toward the east.

He looked into the valley and frowned, imagining the slash of concrete highways and the flashing neon of gas stations and diners. Already the lower valleys had 'discovered' Lodgepole, once a sleepy little nothing village clustered on a nowhere crossroads. They had discovered skiing and so had needed the motels, restaurants and service stations. They had discovered the fishing and hiking of summer and so had bought up the land for cabins and summer homes. When nearby ranchers suffered the increased taxes and decreased beef prices, the land grabbers had flocked in, sectioning off the grass for miniature villages or condominiums.

McChord was resisting it all, clinging to the satisfaction of his fifteen acres as though it were an oasis in the desert. Yet it wouldn't last. He knew that. There would be an increase in taxes, which always followed an influx of city dwellers, and there would be ordinances to require septic systems, running water and electricity. There would be stiffer regulations on hunting, fishing and trapping. The game would seep back farther into the hills and the streams would become polluted. His government pension would not stretch to meet bills and he would have to get a job, probably working too far from the house to ride the horse. He would need a car or a pick-up.

Carlene a threat? Hell, he knew that Carlene was no more of a threat than just plain living. The threat hung everywhere, like the creeping tentacles of night swinging across the world. The crush of progress swept forward in an unstoppable current, like water seeping through grass.

He reined the horse in at the foot of Halfway Ridge and swung down, tying the lead rope to a willow that grew near the base of the rocks. Brandy would stand there while he checked the cliff.

McChord dragged the Winchester from the scabbard and jacked a cartridge into the chamber before pulling

off the spurs and hanging them over the saddlehorn. Then he started up the steep slant of the path that angled toward the top of the cliff several hundred feet above him. The trail widened and narrowed in places, wound around a knuckle of rocks onto a windswept, flat area. He could see no sign of the rifle.

It could be down there, he decided, looking down over the lip of the cliff at the steep slide of snow. A thick, pungently wild scent flailed at his nostrils at the same time that he spotted the crumpled hat wedged in the stones of the path.

Bowman's!

He heard the growl then, a low, rumbling sound that gave meaning to the smell. A handful of pebbles trickled down the face of the ledge to his right and he looked up, his eyes widened in disbelief, the rifle clutched uselessly in his hands at a ridiculous kind of port-arms.

Ten feet above him, the heavy-bodied sasquatch towered on a lump of rock, his massive arms holding a stone high above his head. In the poised instant before the rock was hurled at him, McChord's eyes swept the entire scene. The giant stood eight feet tall, perhaps more, and his huge body was sheathed in a coat of thick, red-brown hair. It was the eyes that held McChord's attention, black and small, rimmed with the red of pain and madness. The eyes were even more wild than the monster itself. The slash-like mouth curled in a snarl, saliva dripping childishly, and the beast hurled the rock with all the strength that was in him.

McChord moved then, swiftly, cat-like, diving to one side as the heavy missile thundered past and the edge of it caught his booted ankle. Pain splintered through his leg, but despite it, he gathered his legs under him and pushed, struggling to his feet to face what he knew must come. The sasquatch was a vast shadow leaping down from the crumpled rocks above to land on the ledge in a kind of half-crouch. Huge hands lifted, reaching out, and beyond them the wild; tormented eyes that never left his own.

He still could not use the rifle. The terror of what had leapt at him from the side of the mountain had frozen him in a strange inability to jerk back the hammer with his thumb and pull the trigger. But there was no terror

in the sasquatch, only the wild, steaming violence of brute anger moving toward him in a snarling rage. Then McChord saw the reason for the blind, red-eyed viciousness. There was a gray, seeping line of pus at the base of the monster's skull, and he had seen too many bullet wounds not to recognize one now.

It was his last serious look at the animal. With a roar, the Bigfoot lunged, his heavy hand slamming at McChord. The rifle came up instinctively but there was no blocking the power of the hairy arm. He felt the rifle ripped from his grasp, the barrel crashing into the side of his head, and in the same instant his body was thrown from the ledge and out into the cold space beyond the cliff.

Stunned, he was aware of the gut-tight sensation of falling, a rush of frozen air enveloping him, then the bone-jarring impact of his body crumpling into the hard packed snow. He was sliding then, spinning out of control in a semi-consciousness that ended when his chest struck something hard. He stopped, his nostrils catching the pine scent of the scrub tree that had halted his slide.

He tried to rise, hands clawing at the snow in an effort to get to his feet before meeting the next onslaught. His limbs refused to work and pain swallowed him in a hazy wash that swept over him like a wave. He knew the sasquatch would be coming in for the kill, to rip him to shreds; but he could not defend himself, and finally the dizzy cloud of blackness swept over him.

He came out of the vertigo of unconsciousness slowly, the side of his face numbed by the snow and his fingers stiff with the cold, almost refusing to work. The pain seemed to be all the heat left in him, a searing lance of fire that tore at his ribs and a heavy, thundering ache that beat through his head.

The sasquatch was gone. Even before he opened his eyes he knew by the wet smell of the snow and the clean scent of the pine that he was alone. There was no trace of the wild, gamy odor of the beast that had attacked him. He swung his head to stare at the lip-like path from which he had been hurled like an old shirt. The power of the beast held him in awe, but then, he had

heard they were as strong as several men. He'd also heard that they were timid.

Timidity was hardly this one's problem, and McChord knew why. The bullet wound at the base of the giant's skull explained a lot to him. The sasquatch didn't act like others of his breed because he was eaten up with pain; he'd been hurt by a man with a rifle and was now bent on destroying every man he saw carrying a gun. It also explained why Burack's rifle had been smashed and why Nye's fishing rod case had been crushed. The sasquatch had thought the case was another weapon of agony.

McChord pulled himself painfully to his feet, swaying in the snow, while the answers settled themselves into place in his head. Hate rifles, huh, he thought. Fine. That hatred is what I'll kill you with. He gathered up his own rifle from where it lay half buried in the slide, as well as his hat, then staggered toward where he had left Brandy. The pain of cracked ribs burned like fire.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TOM MURPHY snapped his lighter at a cigarette and settled back on the pillow, his mind divided. Part of his thinking was focused on the warm softness of Elaine Burns lying cuddled against him, and the other, oddly enough, centered on his wife. It irritated him.

Elaine stirred sleepily at his side, basking in the afterglow of their love-making, and probed her cheek into the hollow of his shoulder. He stroked her skin, liking the touch of it, the pliancy of her breasts and the firm flesh of her shoulders. He didn't want to think about her or Alice, but his brain insisted on it. He shoved the thoughts viciously from his mind, not wanting to make choices or decisions under the handicap of sex. The thoughts returned like the goading of a swarm of gnats.

What should occupy his thoughts, he knew, was the killing of those three men. Even that thought brought a bitterness surging through him but, of late, the bitterness was not directed against Russ McChord. It was against himself. All the clues, all the arguments Russ had dumped in his lap were things that he, as a law enforcement officer, should have been able to discover on his own. Yet he hadn't. For the first time in his life he had shoved facts aside to embrace theory.

Sasquatch! Bigfoot! Great God, it was as insane as having a series of killings done by a werewolf or a vampire. It was like living in a nightmare because McChord, Elaine and Plankenhorn were right. Eliminate the impossible, as Elaine suggested. Fine, except that the impossible could not be eliminated. When he tried he was left with flimsy excuses, not facts.

Firearms were the connecting factor between all the killings, nothing more, and it was simple in the extreme. A Bigfoot had become enraged at men carrying long guns through the forests and was now engaged in killing them. Maybe his mate had been shot, or one of his offspring, or himself. Who knew how the hatred for weapons had developed in that primitive mind; the fact was that it was there and it was his duty to put a stop to it.

The problem was, how? He couldn't put out an APB on a Bigfoot any more than he could organize a party to find it; at least not without holding himself up to national ridicule.

When he met with the county commissioners tonight, what should he tell them?

It was always so simple in the science fiction movies, when the hero discovered that the world was about to be destroyed by aliens. He simply itemized all the facts and the President called out the militia and they blew the damned things up with A-bombs, or something. Nuts! Hollywood could do anything, because moviegoers went to theaters with a preconception of the story. He was trapped, and in his frantic search for a solution his thoughts centered on what he actually had here in Lodgepole.

A home, a measure of respect, good money, and a job that he had liked up till now. Now it would appear that everything was crumbling. In four hours he would stand before that august body of commissioners and attempt to tell them what was going on. Undoubtedly that newspaperman, Harry Backus, would be there, his pencil poised. What he told them at nine o'clock tonight would be the most important statement he'd ever had to make, and he was scared.

If he told them that a beserk animal, half-ape, half-man, was knocking off the population, he would be looking for a new job tomorrow and Harry Backus would have the story of his life. The whole world would examine him in the newspapers, chuckle among themselves, and rip him to shreds verbally while the press had a field day.

He had to hold them off somehow; he had to answer their questions satisfactorily without tipping his hand about the truth of the matter. Then, somehow, he had to kill that damned thing. Somehow he had to bring this to a conclusion. If he could put a bullet into the sasquatch, *then*, drop the body into their laps with his explanation of the killings, he'd be home free. Just that quickly he could be transformed into hero instead of idiot.

How the hell does one go about finding a thing that hardly anyone has ever seen? There were hunts going on

at this minute, by people much better equipped than him, searching throughout the northwest for these elusive giants. It had been going on for years and every party had come up empty-handed. Other than an occasional report, blurred photograph, or a few shaky feet of movie film and a handful of plaster casts, the world knew little more today than the early trappers did.

'Thinking of Alice?' Elaine spoke with her mouth pressed against his chest. Her lips and breath tickled pleasantly on his skin.

'No.' He took a final drag on the cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray on the bedside table. Outside the western sky blazed crimson with streaks of purple as the sun winked out.

'Liar.' Her lips pursed to kiss his chest and her fingers twined the hair that curled down his stomach. 'Men always think of their wives when they're cheating.'

'I was thinking of the case, smart-ass.'

'Willing to admit it's a Bigfoot?'

'Not to any fat man in a diplomat hat with a pencil.'

'You'll have to think up something to tell the front office.'

'I know.'

'What *are* you going to tell them, darling?' She pushed his fingers away from her breast. 'And stop that, before you turn me on again.'

Tom grinned. 'What's wrong with that?'

Elaine readjusted her position against him. 'Time, for one thing, and besides, I don't know if I want to make love to a man who's thinking about other things.'

'Like Alice?'

'Like Alice.'

'Well, I wasn't thinking of her.'

'Fine, but I still don't want to make love again. I want to take a shower and hear what you have to say about the story you intend to palm off on the commissioners.'

'Psychopathic killer, I guess.'

'Really, Tom!' She leaned across him to filch a cigarette from his pack on the night table and he kissed the soft curve of her breast. 'Stop that, you sex maniac,' she grinned. When she had lit the cigarette she slipped out of bed and headed for the bathroom, her buttocks jiggling enticingly.

'What's wrong with that story?' he asked.

She turned on the hot water in the shower and came out to stand in the doorway, lithe and delectable in her nudity as she leaned against the wood. 'They won't buy it. I wouldn't, so why should they?'

'Because they don't know what you know, beautiful.' Tom lit another cigarette, remembering that Alice had told him that he smoked too much. 'It'll hold them for awhile.'

She snorted smoke through her nostrils in derision. 'For how long?'

'Long enough for me to go after it.'

She stared at him, and concern gnarled her soft features. 'Don't do that, Tom. Not alone.'

He grinned. 'Maybe I'll take Russ McChord with me, or that college boy with the big shoulders.' He could see her mind working, wrestling with the thoughts of what he intended. She traced an outline on the rug with a bare toe, then looked at him suddenly.

'I don't like it,' she told him, 'not at all.'

He made no comment. There was really none to make. He simply lay there, his left hand bracing his head on the pillow, while he allowed his eyes to outline the warm curves of her body. Even when he was doing that, Alice leaped into his mind and he automatically compared them before he could check his thoughts. Elaine was lithe, almost thin, with a firm strength to her. Her high breasts had just begun a kind of sensual relaxation that made her body, with its small waist and flat stomach, even more alluring.

Alice had grown fleshy of late, her body relaxing under the pressure of time, and her waist and hips were laced with the slightly bluish webbing of stretch-marks from her only pregnancy. He forced the thoughts of pregnancy and their dead child to go unfinished.

'Does it matter, Tom?' Her blue eyes were fixed on him, a mist in them. 'What I think, I mean?'

He shook his head. 'I know what I'm going to have to do,' he told her firmly.

'You know what you *think* you have to do,' she protested, 'but you're not equipped for it. Even as good as McChord is, he might not be good enough to do it.

Don't forget, if the killer *is* a sasquatch, you're dealing with something that's more of a will-o-the-wisp then—'

'I know that,' he cut in. 'I also know Russ McChord and what he'll tell me if I ask him to go along. I also know that something has got to be done and fast. Cut the problem up in any way you want to and the solution is the same. The killer has to be stopped, and I have to do it.'

'How?'

He swung his long legs out of bed and began pulling on his clothes. 'That's one of the problems I still have to figure out,' he told her. 'Bait, maybe. The killer hates guns . . . I dunno. I can hold the commissioners temporarily, at least until I get things ironed out in my head.' He stuffed his shirt into his pants, walked over and kissed her lightly on the mouth. 'Take your shower before you waste your hot water. I have to get ready for the inquisition.'

'Meet me afterwards at the Pine Tree?'

'Okay,' he said.

She smiled at him and went into the shower stall. She was close to tears, he knew, but they'd talked about the danger of this business before. She hadn't been sure that if she could handle it. Maybe not. He let himself out, his mind a jumble of wild, racing thoughts.

He swung his car into the driveway at his small house and sat for a moment looking at it, wondering whether or not he could hold onto it. It was that critical. If the commissioners believed his fabricated story he could hang onto the house and what was left of his way of life. If not, God alone knew what would happen.

It wasn't a big place, but then, with only him and Alice, there was no need for anything huge. It was of the new style of squared logs, all on one floor, with the addition of the carport on one end and a woodshed for the fireplace in the rear. He hadn't realized until lately just how much he liked the cabin-style home. Odd, he decided, how the mind focused on things taken for granted when a man was faced with their possible loss.

He got out, slammed the door and stalked into the house quickly, heading straight to the bathroom. He showered without dallying, aware that he had to hurry,

his mind still wrestling with the coming verbal battle with the commissioners. He was still in a mental rehearsal after he had emptied the pockets of his uniform, dumped it into the clothes hamper, and walked into the bedroom to pile his personals on the dresser.

'Going out?'

He said, 'Yeah, commissioners' meeting.' He heard her coming through the short hall from the living room.

'I thought that was next week.'

'A special meeting,' he said, walking to the closet to dig out another uniform. 'About the killings.'

When he turned from the closet and noticed her, he stopped suddenly, nude from the shower, with the uniform draped over one arm.

He tried masking the start she had given him, but it was lame. That she had her hair done wasn't much of a surprise, but that she wore makeup and that the shapeless housecoat was gone certainly was. There was a kind of radiance to the deep chestnut color of her hair that he hadn't seen in a long time, but that alone wasn't what caught his attention, nor was it the crimson, high-necked Chinese robe that seemed to cling to her body. It was more of an aura she emitted, he decided, a kind of youthfulness he had thought was gone from both of them.

She smiled at his discomfiture and came into the room. 'I had my hair done,' she said softly. 'I can tell you approve.'

'It's nice,' he mumbled, and began pulling on his clothes.

'I suppose that's what I get for scheming.'

'Huh?'

'I thought I could talk you into taking me out tonight,' she said, and fixed her dark eyes on his. 'Assuming you have no other engagements.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

The smile still tugged at her mouth. 'Let's not argue, shall we, Tom? An emergency meeting of the commissioners shouldn't take more than an hour. You and I could go up to the lodge for a while.'

He nodded absently. 'Yes, we could.'

Alice settled on the edge of the bed, her eyes watching him as he straightened his uniform tie in the mirror. 'You'll be free tonight?'

'Of course. Why not?'

She sighed. 'We've been married a long time, Tom. Perhaps too long. I don't know. It's been long enough for me to see another woman in the picture *before* I heard the gossip.'

'Alice, what the hell are you getting at?'

'You and Elaine, obviously.' She lit a cigarette with nervous fingers, her hands shaking. 'I suppose it's my fault, in a way. I haven't been . . .'

'So that's why you're all dolled up?' He swung to face her, official-looking in the clean pressed uniform. 'Alice, let's not get tangled up in fights tonight.'

'I intend to go down swinging, Tom.' There was a mist in her eyes and the cigarette shook. 'I hope you don't expect me to simply bow out gracefully.'

'I don't expect you to bow out at all.' He glanced at his watch. I'm going to be late. I'll be home before ten, then we'll go up to the lodge.'

She watched him leave, and a moment later the front door closed gently. She put out the cigarette in the ashtray and waited until the car had backed out of the driveway. Then she dissolved in tears on the bed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Russ McChord leaned heavily on the polished surface of the bar at the Pine Tree Inn, breathing lightly to keep the pain in his ribs down and moving only to lift the shotglass gingerly to his lips. He paid scant attention to the beer drinkers who lined the far end of the bar and for the most part allowed the thoughts of the sasquatch to occupy his mind.

Occasionally he listened to bits and pieces of the talk from Jim Hazen, Frank Hayes and the others who knotted together six feet away. Mostly, he remembered.

The memory was painful, but it was full of answers to the questions that had dogged him since the first attack on Burack. It brought a bitterness to his mouth that could only be partially wiped out by the whiskey. In his mind, the memory was as if he were looking at a movie film. He could see the cool autumn night and the horse dancing in the corral, snorting in fear and kicking in frustration at the poles that enclosed it. He'd taken his rifle from the pegs over the door when he heard the horse raising hell outside, knowing that it was another damned bear. He even remembered Carlene's eyes as she watched him lever a shell into the weapon.

'Don't kill it, Russ,' she had pleaded.

'I won't,' he had assured her. 'I'll miss damned close, but I won't kill him.'

He had moved out of the house, closing the door against the light of the lamps inside, and had waited until his eyes had become accustomed to the dark. He could hear something other than the horse, down where the poles of the corral were nailed to the log barn. In the faint light of the moon he could see Brandy trotting back and forth, a scud of dust following his hoofs.

Then the dark, hump-like shape of the animal near the barn caught his eye. He lifted the rifle and snapped off a shot at the area near the animal. Splinters flew from the top rail near the shape and he heard a howl of surprise. Then it was gone. He could hear it crashing through the lodgepole pine that grew behind the barn.

He waited a moment until the crashing progress had ceased, then he had gone back to Carlene and the bottle.

Now standing at the bar and drinking to kill the pain in his ribs, head and ankle, McChord felt the enormity of what he had done beating at him with the relentlessness of waves lashing an Oregon cliff. He knew where the wound in the sasquatch's neck had come from. It was a 30/30 reload, a 150 grain, jacketed bullet propelled by 32 grains of IMR 4064 powder to give it a velocity of 2100 feet per second.

He poured another shot from the bottle before him and bolted it, the motion twisting his ribs until the pain seared against his side like a branding iron. He sat the glass down and stared into its emptiness with the hollow feeling deep in his guts. He had killed them, and the realization that he was responsible for the death of three men shook him violently. He'd had no love whatever for old man Burack, and he didn't give a damn about Cal Bowman. Ernie Nye was just another drunk—but, Christ! To know that your bullet had set off a reaction that took three innocent lives . . .

He bolted another shot, taking a kind of pleasure from the pain—somehow *wanting* to be in pain, as if in the hurt of his body he might atone for his stupidity. His mistake. He closed his eyes momentarily and saw the razor strap in his father's hand, lifted high, poised to come crashing down in punishment. He wanted that strap now, but no punishment would return things to the way they had been. No way a man can call back a bullet once the trigger is pulled, and in this case, there would be no punishment.

It seemed there had been nothing but hopelessness in everything he had done throughout most of his life, and the knowledge ate at him and galled him. There had been little sense in Viet Nam, sheer stupidity in the Army, and now the life that he had wanted was crumbling like a dry snowball.

'Russ?' It was Carlene at his elbow. He hadn't heard her come in.

'Want a drink?' he asked.

'No, and you're getting drunk. What happened to you?'

'Got in a fight.'

'With what?'

'Not what, Carlene, *whom*.'

'I saw Doc at the lodge tonight. He said he wrapped up your ribs and that you had gotten clobbered. What happened?'

'I'll tell you some time.' He grinned and poured another slug from the bottle.

'Tell me now.'

'Can't.'

'Russ McChord, you're getting drunk.'

His grin was lopsided. 'I know it. How long you known me, Carlene? You ever know me to get drunk?'

'No, and I don't want you drunk tonight. I want to talk to you.'

'Can't. Talk in here and everyone hears you. Besides, I gotta see Moses.'

She took him by the arm, tugging at him. 'Come outside, Russ. The air will clear your head and we can talk. Then you can come back and get drunk if you want to. *Please*.'

He didn't answer her. He finished his drink and headed toward the door, the spurs chinking in rhythm to his slightly off-center walk.

Outside the night was clear and cold, a breeze shuddered out of the west and a billion stars winked and burned just beyond the yellow ring of the street lights. Russ leaned against one of the roof pillars and rolled a cigarette methodically while Carlene clutched the collar of her coat to her throat and looked at him. Their breathing hung in clouds, steamy in the cold.

'I didn't sleep with Brock,' she said finally.

'Huh?' He paused in licking the glue on the homeroll and blinked at her.

'I saw you sitting on your horse on the hill when Brock took me home. I know you think I went to bed with him, but I didn't.'

The cold began to shatter the effects of the whiskey and he straightened against the pole, twirling the ends of the cigarette. He touched a match to it and looked at her through the smoke. 'I didn't say anything, did I?'

She shook her head. 'Look at your face. You didn't have to say anything. Brock beat you up, didn't he?'

He blew smoke at the stars. 'No,' he said.

'Don't lie to me, Russ McChord! Doc told me you'd been beaten up. I suppose you'll have to pretend that you fell off your damned horse.'

He shook his head and settled the hat down over his eyes to cut off the light from the street lamp. 'I got thrown all right, but not off a horse. I got knocked off a cliff.'

In the light from the street he could see her eyes widen in surprise as she studied him. It struck him then, in the soft light, that she was pretty. It also struck him that a thought like that was kind of silly, but it was true. There was a sweetness to the shape of her face that he hadn't noticed before, and it intrigued him. He also had the fleeting thought of forgetting the woods, the Bigfoot and the cabin and simply giving in to society. Let them win, he thought briefly. Shoot Brandy, burn the cabin and go back to civilized life with her. The thought had merit, he decided, then dismissed it, preferring to play out the hand that he had been dealt.

'The sasquatch,' Carlene said softly, and snuffed out the question of wild and tame once and for all.

He nodded. 'When you saw me on the hill, I was going after Bowman's rifle. I wanted to see if it had been smashed, too.'

'Was it?'

McChord sucked smoke into his lungs and let it out slowly. 'Didn't find it. I found his hat jammed in the rocks, and I found the Bigfoot. Or rather, he found me. Lucky it's winter or I'd be dead.'

'Did you tell the Sheriff?'

'No. He probably wouldn't believe me, besides . . .' he paused long enough to drop the cigarette butt into the snow '. . . I'm going after it.'

'Alone? Russ, you can't!'

'My bullet is in the base of that Bigfoot's neck,' he told her without emotion. 'That bear I shot last fall wasn't a bear. Remember the one I wanted to scare, honey? Well unlike a bear, this sasquatch can reason, at least to a degree. He knows a rifle caused him the pain and he's bent on destroying every rifle he sees, and he has to be stopped.'

'Russell, you can't blame yourself . . .'

'Who do I blame then? The Republican administra-

tion? I had a feeling somehow I'd get involved in tracking this thing down. I never thought it was my bullet that got it all started in the first place, but that just adds to the responsibility. Now I have to finish it.'

'And what if you can't? I know you're good, but you're not stalking a bear now.'

His grin was mirthless. 'If I can't, who will?'

'A party.'

'Would be worthless, and you know it. I'm going back to get drunk while my system still feels like it.'

'When are you leaving?'

'In the morning.'

She started to say something. He could see her lips forming the words and he decided he didn't want to hear them. He felt that it wouldn't take much at all to convince him to do a dumb thing like ask her to marry him. He turned and went back into the bar quickly, closing the door on whatever she had wanted to say.

The bottle was still there, just as the pain in his ribs was still there, but the whiskey would cut the edge. He would have to be careful, though, not to get too drunk. He still wanted to see Moses Elkhorn and talk about the sasquatch. Maybe he could take the old man a bottle and they would get drunk together.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MURPHY and his wife occupied themselves with small talk after he had picked her up. During the drive out to the ski lodge he hadn't wanted to say much. His mind was too preoccupied with the meeting an hour earlier during which the commissioners had grilled him like a battery of defense lawyers, until he had left the courthouse feeling like a bungling fool.

The key word, he gathered, to the whole meeting was *action*. He tried explaining the methods of the law to them, pointing out the various problems of dealing with the criminal mind, and trying to make himself sound less of a boob than they apparently thought he was. Still, he had been the one to come out of the confrontation looking for shelter, a hole he could jump into and pull in over himself.

'Why so solemn, Tom?' Alice asked as he pulled into the parking lot. 'The commissioners?'

He nodded and whipped the car into a slot. 'I suppose they're right, but they keep harping on action as if I haven't been doing my job.'

'They're concerned, I suppose, and frightened.'

'No more than I am.' He slipped out of the car and walked around to open her door.

The entrance to the lodge's restaurant and bar led through a lounge area in which a massive stone fireplace crackled and snapped with flames so carefully built as to seem almost artificial. Skiers, devoid of their slope uniforms, held drinks and talked together in a surge of color against the warmth of the fire. Others had settled themselves on the various pieces of heavily upholstered furniture that had been scattered about the dimly lighted room. Large, drape-lined windows presented a view of the mountains, bled of color by the night and the moon.

Tom checked their coats inside the door and followed the hostess who led them through the candlelit restaurant to a secluded table. Seated, Tom scanned the menu.

'Hungry?'

Alice shook her head and pilfered a cigarette from the pack he had tossed on the table.

'I'm starving.' He held a lighter out for her. 'Sure you don't want something?'

'A martini will be fine. You go ahead.'

When the waitress returned, he gave her an order for two martinis and a medium steak, then lit his own cigarette. A flock of butterflies skittered around inside him and he tried to fight off the feeling. Combat jitters, he thought. It had been a long time since he had felt them.

During the pause Alice had been eyeing him closely. 'Do you love her?' she asked suddenly.

'Elaine?'

'Of course.'

'In a way, I suppose so. That's a rather tough question to answer because it's a rather odd situation. I'm not sure talking about it makes much sense.'

'What else can we do? I feel a bit strange playing second fiddle in this thing. I don't like it, but I want to be adult enough to look at it squarely.'

He studied her closely, seeing a great deal of the woman she used to be looking back at him across the table. She was a little older, as he was. There were tiny brackets at the corners of her mouth and webbed lines at her eyes, but for all that she had maintained an aura of beauty which the years had simply matured.

His relationship with Elaine had jolted her into a kind of fighting trim. She'd done her hair, put on makeup and had made herself back into the woman she'd once been—all because she felt she was losing him. Where had this woman been lurking for the past few years, he asked himself. Her attempt was clumsy in that it was transparent, but he knew that almost anything men and women did was clumsy, from the sophomorish managing of a first kiss to the trembling blunders of initial sexual beginnings. Could he blame her for being human? Could she blame him?

'Adult, Alice?' he asked gently. 'When have we been adults? *Real* adults?'

'I thought we were.'

'Somewhere along the line we got things screwed up good. Maybe it was me . . . probably . . . who knows? The *whys* of the thing are really academic anyhow. Over

the years I became afraid to touch you. Afraid of refusals, of excuses. Finally, just plain afraid to love you. It might have been because of the baby, or it might have been something else. I'm not a psychologist. All I know is that someone broke something somewhere.'

'Something you found again in Elaine?'

'I don't know,' he said honestly. 'I don't want to go into any details about anything because, frankly, it's as painful for me as it is for you. Until now I've never cheated on you. Now I have. I've done what I felt was necessary, but I don't want this damned table to turn into a confessional.'

'What do you want, Tom?' Her eyes searched his. 'Do you want me, or Elaine? You can't have us both, you know.'

He crushed out the cigarette with a thick forefinger and immediately lit another. 'Somehow I don't feel I have a choice. I feel that I lost you a long time ago, and I'll be damned if I want to go through the motions of being married if that's how it is.'

She nodded and didn't speak while the waitress placed their martinis on the table. When the girl had gone, Alice sipped her drink and looked at him over the rim of her glass. 'The blame of what's happened belongs to both of, dear. I know what I've been . . .'

Murphy waved an arm and gulped his drink. 'Oh, hell, we could sit here all night and throw rocks or roses and never solve a damned thing. I don't want to. If you're willing, I'd like to try to enjoy myself.'

She smiled her agreement. 'I'd like that.' She paused, her eyes searching. 'You've got something on your mind. I mean other than the obvious.'

Tom nodded. 'That's why I want to enjoy myself.'

'I thought so. You always had a tendency to live it up when you have something difficult to do. You've got something like that lined up now, haven't you?'

He nodded again and sipped the martini.

'The killings? Something connect with them?'

Again the nod.

'You can tell me, Tom.' Her voice was gentle. 'You know I won't give you any trouble, whatever it is.'

'You never have in any of the police work I've done, but this is a bit out of the ordinary. Still, it's my job.'

'You've gone after psycho—'

'It isn't a nut, Alice,' he cut in. 'That's what I told the commissioners *and* what I'd prefer the public believed; but it's a bigger than that.' He finished his drink and signalled the waitress for a couple more. He looked back at his wife, his face serious. 'It's a sasquatch.'

'You're serious, Tom? I mean, I've heard the talk around town, but I thought—'

'I'm afraid it's true. Oh, the talk is scuttlebutt. They don't know for sure. They're playing hunches, and they don't know just how correct they are. The fact is that somehow, don't ask me how, a Bigfoot, or sasquatch, or whatever the hell those things are, has gone bananas and knocked off three men.'

'You told the commissioners . . .' She stopped abruptly as the waitress brought another round of drinks, waiting until she had left before resuming. 'You told the commissioners about the Bigfoot?'

'Hell, no,' He sipped at the fresh drink. 'It'd be worth my job to tell them that. I let them go on thinking it was a deranged killer. I mumbled a lot of hogwash at them, but the thing that seemed to pacify them was that I told them I'd wrap the case up in a week.'

'A week! Do you think you can? I mean . . .'

He dragged nervously on the cigarette and nodded. The nod was emphatic. 'I've got to. I'm getting pressure from all sides—the commissioners, the population of Lodgepole, and lately, even the press.'

'I know. I read the latest story, with all its sly insinuations about the blundering Sheriff of Lodgepole County and the fact that a killer is running loose.'

'That's exactly what I mean. I'm going to be barbecued from every angle if I don't come up with something, and the only thing that'll secure all the bases is the head of that sasquatch. I've got to get him.'

The waitress brought the steak over and set it before him. While she walked away, he absently watched the trim length of her legs beneath the short skirt. He glanced up at Alice in a mild embarrassment, but she winked at him and sipped her drink.

'How will you catch him, Tom?' she asked at length. 'No one else has ever been able to.'

'That's because most sasquatches don't seem to have

any weaknesses,' he told her, talking through a forkful of steak. 'This one does. He hates rifles, or at least that seems to be the only common denominator to the problem. So it seems to me that if the bait is dangled, the fish will bite.'

'And the bait is?'

'Me.'

Alice didn't answer him right away. Her face became a trifle grave as she thought it over, but she had never interfered before in his work and she knew she could not now. He could see that working in her, but she simply swirled her drink and said, 'I see.'

She didn't see, though, and he knew it well; but she was a cop's wife and had hardened herself to a lot of things. Hell, he didn't see how he could do it himself. All he knew for certain was that in the morning he was turning the office over to Charley Spencer and he was going to swing on a pack, stuff a box of shells into his pocket and take the 30-06 out into the woods. If he was lucky the Bigfoot would find him, and if he was careful he just might get out with minor bruises or a broken leg or something. If he wasn't careful, Lodgepole County would need another Sheriff. He let that thought go unfinished.

'This steak is delicious,' he said into the silence. 'Sure you won't have some?'

'I'm sure.' She smiled in an attempt at lightness and the glow of the small lamp revealed white, even teeth. 'I've been getting a bit fleshy. Cutting down a little won't hurt.'

He looked at her seriously, steak poised on the fork halfway to his mouth. 'I think you look very pretty tonight.'

'Thank you, darling.' She paused. 'It's been a while since you've said something like that.'

'It's been awhile since I thought something like that.'

'*Touche*. Maybe if we both work on a few things . . .' She bit her lower lip instead of voicing the thought.

Murphy reached across the table and placed his hand over hers. 'I've always been a believer in first things first. Let me wind up this case before we launch another engagement.'

'Fair enough.'

The waitress with the trim legs brought another round of drinks that Tom hadn't ordered. He looked at her, puzzled.

'The gentleman at the bar, Sheriff,' she explained, and nodded toward the fireplace section of the lodge.

As Murphy swung to look at the bar, Harry Backus lifted his drink in a smiling salute and Murphy nodded his thanks before turning back to his wife.

'Friend of yours, Tom?' she asked.

'Hardly,' he snorted softly through his nose. 'That's the mild-mannered reporter of the *Medford Chronicle*. The one whose deathless prose insinuated that a laconic sheriff and a clumsy investigation was obstructing justice.'

'He's coming over,' Alice told him. 'May I scratch out his eyes?'

'Better not. Maybe he'll be my opponent's campaign manager next year and he'll make me a shoe-in.'

'Good evening, Sheriff,' Backus greeted him. 'How's the case coming?'

'Fine, Harry. Thanks for the drink.'

Backus waved it away and stood near the edge of the table. He still wore the city-style overcoat unbuttoned over his rather large stomach and the black diplomat hat had been shoved back far enough so that the edge of his thin hair protruded.

'Permit me to introduce my wife Alice,' Tom said after a moment. 'Dear, this is Harry Backus of the *Chronicle*.'

They told each other they were charmed, though Tom thought he detected a note of frost in Alice's voice. There was a brief silence.

'Sheriff, just how close are you to wrapping up this case?'

'Now, you know I can't stick my neck out on something like that, Backus. A lot of things can happen, which is about what I told the commissioners this evening. You should have been there.'

'I'm sorry I didn't know about it, but I talked to one of them later and he said you'd wrap it up in a week.'

Murphy cursed mentally, knowing that Backus, with unerring instinct, had singled out the weakest of the bunch on which to do his probing—probably Jonas

Klauser, who should have retired thirty years ago. He lit a cigarette and grinned at the newsman.

'Hell,' he snorted, 'it could be sooner than that, and it could take longer. When you're dealing with a psychopathic type you can't predict a wrap-up in the same way as in another case. It always varies. You know that.'

'Is it a berserk killer, Sheriff?' Backus lifted his drink to his mouth to cover a smirk.

'If it isn't,' Murphy parried, 'it certainly is a killer with an odd style.'

'You're not much help, Sheriff. The paper'd like to have a story for tomorrow. We've got a lot of interested readers to please, y'know.'

'Why don't you get the rest of the story from Klauser?' Murphy suggested.

'Which one is he?' Backus asked innocently.

'The one who looks like he ought to be planting petunias or something.'

'Oh, yes, the old gentleman.' Harry's smile was broad. A gold cap flashed in the soft light. 'I may do just that.'

'And your friend Brock?' Murphy asked. 'Has he located any sasquatches yet?'

'Not that I know of.' He paused and nodded to Alice. 'Well, I've got to be on my way. Have a nice evening, both of you.' He turned away, then back. 'Oh, by the way, Sheriff, those hairs in the autopsy on the cowboy were brown, weren't they?'

Murphy looked him right in the eye. 'They were chestnut-colored. Same color as his horse's mane.'

'Then they were horse hairs, huh?'

'What else *could* they be? Cowboys and horses go together, don't they?'

'I guess they do. Well, pleasant evening, folks.'

Murphy watched Backus waddle away, then turned back to his wife, somewhat surprised that the reporter would try a dumb trap like that; but even more surprised that he knew about the hairs.

'Were they horse hairs?' Alice asked softly.

'No. The report from the lab labeled them as hairs from an unknown animal. That report, I might add, is locked in my safe at the office.'

'You can't simply present the evidence as such?'

'What evidence? *Unknown* stamped on everything?

Heads ripped off, fishing rod cases stomped on? Hell, this case is bizarre enough, without adding to it. In the past I've cooperated with the press, police officials, county commissioners, the whole bunch. However, this time I'm afraid the only thing that will make sense is one dead sasquatch.'

Alice looked into her martini and swirled the last of the liquor. Looking at her, Murphy caught himself admiring her lashes. He hadn't remembered them looking so lovely in the past, and he knew they were hers. Her eyes had tears in them.

'It's going to be dangerous.'

'Let's go home, honey,' he said gently.

She nodded and they gathered up their coats. He paid their bill and held her arm as they walked out into the brisk cold of the night to get the car.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

McChord had just about made up his mind to go to see Moses Elkhorn when the front door of the Pine Tree Inn swung open and the short, thick-set figure of Harry Backus pushed in out of the cold and stood looking around. For an instant, the reporter's small eyes roved about the room as though he were looking for someone; then he shrugged out of the heavy gray overcoat and wool scarf to hang them on one of the hooks. He dropped the idiotic black diplomat hat on a companion hook and bellied up to the bar.

Russ felt a frown curling his forehead and pulling at the corners of his mouth at the sight of the fat man, particularly since the Sheriff's secretary, Elaine Burns, was sitting in the booth behind him. McChord had given up his usual place at the bar when the pain in his ankle had grown worse and had sat down in a rear booth, cursing the Bigfoot's thrown rock.

He had wondered about Elaine, off and on, ever since she came in just before ten o'clock. This wasn't one of the pretty secretary's usual drinking spots, and McChord could only surmise that she was waiting for Tom Murphy. He had never, he recalled, seen her drinking alone; but Tom hadn't shown up, and Elaine had been drinking enough to become a bit tipsy. With Backus here, undoubtedly nosing around for a story, and Elaine somewhat in her cups, Russ had curious fears nagging at him.

The fears centered around his encounter with the sasquatch and the fact that if the wrong word were said to Harry Backus the story would be all over the United States by tomorrow evening. To his knowledge, there had never been a Bigfoot attack anywhere, let alone three killings. That kind of news could blow this particular mountain town sky high. The county would teem with sightseers, hunters, newsmen, television cameras, and God only knew whatall.

Whatever his chances of getting the beast, they would be reduced to almost microscopic possibilities if that happened. He knew he was going to kill that apeman before it had a chance to clobber anyone else.

McChord sipped his shot of Jack Daniels and watched the newsman exchanging pleasantries with two other men hunched over the bar. There were two young skiers from the lodge, decked out in heavy sweaters and nylon jackets, still wearing their ski boots, also at the bar. They stood somewhat apart and what bits of conversation McChord could hear from their end consisted mainly of a hushed but scholarly appraisal of women in bed.

Backus stood between Jim Hazen and the owner of one of the town's service stations, Dave Saunders. A rather young man to own a filling station. Saunders was as thin as Hazen was hefty and there were grease stains on his hands and pants and even in the sides of his longish red hair where he had scooped it out of his eyes to check someone's oil or examine a battery. Dave was stone sober. It seemed apparent from the way he nursed his beer that he had simply wandered in for the companionship of men before going home to his petite, dark-haired wife and their new baby.

Hazen, on the other hand, was getting tanked. His broad shoulders hunched forward, propping himself on his elbows, he swayed slightly and had some difficulty when he tried to put a foot on the brass rail. His wild shock of iron-gray hair looked even wilder, and his eyes were starting to get a bit glazed, but his conversation hadn't begun to slur much. It merely became louder.

'Well, I'd still be careful,' Hazen was telling Harry Backus. When he squinted at the reporter he looked even more like Wallace Beery; all he needed was to have his hair in his eyes instead of straight up. 'Y'walk around this town at night, y'might git shot.'

Backus chuckled phlegmatically, his blunt fingers toying with his beer glass. 'Nobody shoots reporters, Mr Hazen,' he grunted. 'Everyone threatens to, but they don't.'

'Might in this town, what with them Bigfoots stompin' around rippin' off heads.'

'Jim's getting a mite drunk,' Frank Hayes cut in, by way of explanation, and turned to the ex-logger. 'Have you had about enough, Jim?'

Hazen blinked at Frank, then swung to stare at Backus

as though trying to place him. 'I'm only bein' friendly, young fella. Don't wanna see you git shot. Fact is, while most around here don't brag about it, a lot of folks has taken to carryin' sidearms.'

'For Bigfoot?'

'Yes! Tracks all over town! People gittin' scared to go out at night, 'cause them Bigfoots travel at night. See in the dark like cats.'

McChord saw Backus glance at Frank, whc winked at him.

'People *are* getting a bit nervous,' Dave Saunders put in mildly, 'but not because of Bigfoot.'

The reporter swung ponderously to look at Dave. 'Why, then?'

'The killings. We haven't had a killing in Lodgepole County since Max Conners shot Hugh Marino, and that was back in 1881. I guess these latest killings are bound to make folks edgy, but I don't think they're carrying guns.'

'I take it you're not a believer in the Bigfoot story?'

McChord could see Dave's neck redden slightly, even in the faint light of the bar. 'I believe they exist, and I've read a lot about them. I just don't think that a Bigfoot is responsible for what has happened up here. Violence isn't in their nature, except for that incident up in Idaho during the mountain man days.'

'I'm not familiar with that,' Backus prodded and signalled Frank to fill up their glasses. 'What happened?'

'Might not even be true,' Dave pointed out, 'but there was supposed to have been a man killed up in a section of wild country near the Salmon River. Two other men went in and one of them was killed. The survivor said that it was an ape-like beast.'

'They saw it?'

Dave nodded.

'Did the dead man have his head ripped off?'

The station owner shook his head. 'Had fang marks in his neck, which was broken. 'Course, that's a long time ago, and it might not even be true. All the stuff I read about them points out that they're timid, althought they could just get a little mad from time to time.'

'Well, no human tore off Burack's head,' Hazen growled. 'No one has that kind of strength 'cept a Bigfoot,

an' I still say folks is runnin' scared around here and packin' iron.'

'I doubt that,' said Dave carefully.

Hazen blinked at him, then his eyes narrowed. 'Well, don't doubt it,' he snapped. His big hand reached into the front of his Woolrich coat and slammed a revolver down on the bar. 'Don't doubt it!'

Silence fell over the three of them as the pistol crashed onto the bar. Sitting in the booth, McChord found his face cracked in a grin as he poured another shot from his bottle and watched reactions. The bartender seemed flustered, the reporter was visibly shaken, and Saunders merely sipped at his beer. Down the bar, the conversation of women screamed to a halt as the two young skiers stared wide-eyed at the artillery lying on the polished mahogany.

Dave Saunders' shyness was gone with the crash of the gun and McChord's evaluation of the redhead went up a couple of points. 'Put it away, Hazen,' he said flatly, as though this sort of thing happened all the time. 'It's bad enough you've had too much to drink without proving you're crazy.'

'You called me a liar,' Hazen protested, his thick jaw slung forward.

'I don't recall it.'

'Gentlemen, gentlemen . . .' Backus began, but Hazen cut him off gruffly.

'Shut up, reporter! This is between him an' me.'

Behind him, Elaine Burns slid out of her booth and walked determinedly toward the men, her high-heeled shoes clicking on the polished wood of the floor. McChord watched the play of her hips beneath the skirt in approval. Dressed for an evening out, she had obviously been stood up. She swayed just a trifle.

'Give me the gun, Jim.'

Hazen smiled at her, like a kindly grandfather. 'Good evenin', Miss Burns. You're sure pretty tonight.'

'Thank you, Jim. Now give me the gun.'

'Aw, I wasn't gonna hurt no one with it.' He looked rather sheepish.

Elaine sighed. 'I won't ask for it again.' Grudgingly, Jim handed her the revolver, butt first.

'You ain't gonna take my gun, are you, Miss Burns?'

'Of course not, Jim, I'm not big enough for that.' She set the hammer at half-cock, shoved the loading gate open and slowly punched five cartridges out onto the bar. She handed the gun back to Hazen. 'Put that back in your shoulder holster. I know you have a permit to carry that Colt, but there are still laws in this county where firearms are concerned. If I see it on you again, Jim, I'm going to arrest you on every charge from carrying a concealed weapon to disturbing the peace.'

Hazen grinned, his mouth pulling in a wide smile and his gray eyes disappearing into heavy folds. 'By golly, Miss Burns, you ain't only pretty, but you're tough. Was I thirty years younger . . .'

'You'd just be a big, lovable gorilla,' she laughed, 'and not too bright at that. Still, I'll bet you broke a lot of hearts thirty years ago.'

Hazen's face reddened a bit. Elaine patted his arm and spoke to all of them. 'I think I'll go back to my drink and let you gentlemen continue your conversation. Good evening.'

McChord watched her come back to the table behind him. With her back to those at the bar, still walking, she pulled a .32 caliber automatic from the waistband of her skirt and dropped it into her purse. She glanced briefly at him and the cowboy felt a grin tug at his mouth as she sat down.

As much as he wanted to go to see Elkhorn, McChord held back. Backus was still watching Elaine, and Russ had a feeling the reporter was about to go to work. Even though she had handled the gun incident as neatly as he had ever seen, she already had too many drinks snuggled into her firm middle. Backus had surely seen that it was a cinch that he had also surmised that the Sheriff had stood her up. McChord waited for the fat man to make his play. It took three minutes.

Harry Backus, carrying two drinks, dodged with unusual grace around the two skiers who were on their way out the door, then moved like a tank toward Elaine Burns' booth. His voice when he spoke was like sorghum molasses.

'Miss Burns, may I thank you with a drink?'

'I'd be delighted, Mr Backus. Won't you sit down?'

McChord listened to the big man's bulk creak onto

the bench-like seat of the booth and his accompanying sigh. 'Whew! That was some incident at the bar. Thank you again.'

'Jim Hazen wouldn't have caused trouble. He's a sweet old gorilla who would rather be chopping down trees. Still, the Sheriff wouldn't want to see him drinking and carrying a loaded gun.'

'Is that who you're waiting for?'

'Yes.' McChord heard a pause that told him Backus had slipped through her guard. Elaine's voice stumbled a little when she went on. 'He, Charley Spencer and I were going to go over a few things after the commissioner's meeting.'

'Shame. Pretty girl like you being stood up by two men in the one evening. Still, their loss is my gain.'

'I think the Sheriff will be along.'

'I'm afraid not, Miss Burns.' There was a pointed delay in Backus' conversation, probably while he looked her directly in the eyes. 'I just left the ski lodge, where I bought him and his wife a drink. Charming woman, Mrs Murphy, and unusually attractive. I think the Sheriff is lucky to be surrounded by such lovely ladies.'

The lull in their conversation was heavy. McChord poured himself another shot and waited. Backus was throwing his best punches with a syrupy innocence that was calculated to soften her up.

'At least,' Elaine said finally, 'I won't have to drink alone, and the official discussion can wait until tomorrow.'

'True enough. You surprise me, Miss Burns, in the way you handle difficult situations. The bar incident, y'know. That was neatly done.'

'I'm used to that sort of thing, Mister Backus. I'm a deputy sheriff as well as a secretary.'

'I see. Well, with three of you working on this case, I'd say that I can soon write a wrap-up story, except for the ones on the trial.'

'Trial?'

'Yes, of course. When you catch the killer.'

'Oh! I'm afraid I was thinking of other things. I'm sorry.'

McChord heard Backus' slow chuckle. 'I know the way

the brains of police officers work. Always busy. In this case, in particular, there must be a lot to think about.'

'How so?'

'Well, with all the hints at Bigfoot and the population so frightened and carrying guns. Well, you know, this puts me in a kind of spot, Miss Burns.'

'I'd hate to see you in a spot, Mr Backus.'

'I mean, I've been trying to keep ape-men out of the news, but it's becoming more and more difficult, particularly since the lab reports mentioned the hairs found under Cal Bowman's fingernails.'

McChord listened to another heavy pause behind him. So they'd found hairs in Bowman's fingernails? He could see that Backus wasn't buying that psychopathic killer routine either, but as a reporter he was handicapped. He had to have direct quotes to write a monster story and he obviously hadn't gotten anything from the Sheriff tonight. Now he wanted to pump a tipsy broad and shove the quote into her mouth.

'I . . . I haven't seen that report,' said Elaine at length.

'Oh, you haven't? I see.'

'Besides, Mr Backus, I can't discuss Tom's—Sheriff Murphy's case without his authorization.'

Backus waved that away verbally. 'Nonsense, Miss Burns. This conversation is strictly off the record. It's just that the various elements of the thing have made me curious. As a reporter, I have to wait until statements are made officially, but as a reporter I also have an insatiable curiosity.'

'I can understand that. Perhaps you could drop by the office tomorrow and talk to Charley Spencer.'

'Sheriff Murphy won't be there?' he asked quickly.

'H . . . yes, of course he'll be there. But it's usually Charley who handles the news releases, or myself.'

'I see. Well . . .'

McChord stood up and spoke before Backus could finish his sentence. His voice was friendly, as though he and Elaine Burns had known each other for years instead of scarcely carrying on a nodding acquaintance.

'Before you leave, Elaine,' he said gently, 'I'd like to talk to you about your horse.'

Elaine blinked at him and he could see that her eyes

were not too steady. She did have sense enough to keep her mouth shut.

'You have a horse, Miss Burns?' Backus asked.

McChord chuckled good-naturedly. 'Mighty good rider, this young lady,' he put in quickly. 'Though not lately. I've been stabling her horse for her over the winter, but I think we might have some trouble with him.'

'Oh?' Elaine asked in a small voice. He could see that she was trying to sort it all out.

'Actually, I'd rather you took a look at him. If you want, I can do the doctoring myself, but I suspect that he could be developing moon blindness.'

'I hope not, Russ.'

'What is moon blindness, Mister . . . ah . . .'

'McChord. Russ McChord.' His sudden smile at the reporter was friendly and open. 'Moon blindness is a nickname. It comes from a vitamin deficiency, and it can be very serious. It should be looked at, but it can wait until morning, of course.'

'I wish you would have told me sooner, Russ,' Elaine mused.

The cowboy never hesitated. 'Been trying to decide whether to tell you at all, Elaine. I know you think the world of that horse, but I really can't call the vet until I get your okay.'

'I'd like to see this animal,' Backus said quickly. 'That is, if you don't mind, McChord.'

'Heck, no! C'mon out any time. Matter of fact, tomorrow afternoon might be a good time because if her ol' pony gets any worse he'll likely have to be hauled down to Medford.'

'I'd like to see him.'

'Fine, tomorrow then. Say, Elaine, why don't I see you home, since old Tom and Charley must have got waylaid somewhere. You look a mite tired around the eyes, honey.'

'I—I am a bit tired.'

'C'mon then. See you tomorrow, Mr Backus.'

McChord helped Elaine to her feet and into her coat, then took her arm as he guided her to the door. The picture of a jovial cowboy, he shouted a goodbye to the men at the bar and shoved the pretty deputy out into the air. On the porch his smile faded. 'Pick out your car and get in on the passenger's side.'

'Why?'

'Because I'm taking you home. Which one is yours?'

Elaine pointed out a three-year-old Mustang, and McChord tucked her in and pulled off his spurs before sliding behind the wheel. She didn't live more than a couple of blocks from the bar, and he could walk back to where Brandy was tied up. He turned to her. 'Give me the keys, Elaine, and keep your fingers off that automatic.'

'Why, Mr McChord,' she began. She handed him the keys without finishing. When he had got the engine running and had pulled out onto the street, she said, 'Thanks, but I don't know why.'

'You're drunk, that's why, and I don't want you spilling everything you know to that fat-assed Clark Kent.'

'I wasn't about to.'

'Maybe not, but I can't risk it. You know all about this sasquatch business and Backus knows you know. All we need up here is for him to write a monster story, and everything will blow up in Murphy's face.'

'What the hell have *you* been drinking, McChord?' Elaine settled back in the bucket seat, on an angle, and looked across at him with her arms folded. 'I may be a bit tanked, but I distinctly heard what sounded like a note of human compassion in your voice.'

He snorted. 'Human compassion? I just don't want anyone lousing *me* up, but I thought Murphy's position would appeal to you a bit more.'

'One punch for you, but it was below the belt.'

He parked the car at her bungalow and cut the engine. He picked up his spurs and got out, coming around to open her door. 'Can you make it?'

She caught his arm. 'Wait a minute, cowboy,' she said quickly. 'I still want to talk to you, and I think I might have a drink inside, if you don't mind bourbon.'

'I don't.' McChord unlocked the front door for her and tossed the keys on a table just inside. She led him down a short hallway that bordered the living room and snapped on the kitchen light. The room had ruffled curtains and bright paint, a formica counter, modern sink and an electric range.

He checked her hips and legs again beneath the gaberdine skirt as she took the glasses from the cupboard

and rummaged around until she had located half a bottle of Old Grand-dad. The span of her waist was almost tiny. She was slim and somewhat willowy, but her breasts looked ample under the high-necked blouse.

'How do you drink it?' she asked.

'In a glass.'

She splashed in half a swallow for herself but wasn't timid about his drink. She handed it to him and held her own up in the air a bit. 'To Bigfoot,' she said, and gulped it. She smiled at McChord. 'Surprised I can drink?'

'No,' he said slowly. 'I'd be surprised if you couldn't.' He leaned against the sink and she settled at the table.

'I got the feeling, in the car, that you know something that I don't know about this sasquatch business.'

'Maybe.'

'That's how you got your face cut? Taking on an eight-foot ape?'

He took a mouthful of bourbon, held it a minute, then swallowed it. 'I'm going after him tomorrow.'

Her face turned serious. 'You, too?'

'What's that mean?'

'Tom's going out, too—alone.'

McChord snorted. 'He'll get himself killed. He's no damn good in the woods.'

Elaine smiled wryly. 'He has it all figured out, just as you have it all figured out. He knows he can't track the thing, but he figures he can set himself up as bait and make the sasquatch come to him.'

'He's got guts. I'll give him that, even if his brain isn't working too good.'

Her eyes swung to his and held them. 'McChord, can you get this thing? I mean, kill it or capture it?'

'I can kill it,' McChord said flatly. He slugged down the rest of the bourbon and Elaine moved with the bottle to give him more, her motion smooth, cat-like.

She didn't sit back down. She stood there holding the bottle and looking up at him. 'I'm afraid for Tom,' she said softly.

'I don't blame you.' He could see her eyes getting watery. 'Better have another drink yourself.'

She poured herself a little, but held the glass without drinking. 'Tom's a good cop, but that's all he is. He

couldn't track *you* through the wilderness, let alone a Bigfoot. Still, he's being pressured from all sides. He feels it's his duty.'

'Man's gotta do what he thinks is right, Elaine.'

'But this isn't right! That's the trouble!' She put down her drink and sat on the table, balled fists pressed against her temples. The tears were coming, McChord knew. 'I love him, but I guess you know all that. I don't want him hurt, or dead, but I can't stop him.'

He sipped at his drink without speaking for a minute. 'I think,' he said finally, 'you ought to look at this the way it is. Tom's faced with a problem. If he sends out a bunch of men, he runs the risk of getting some of them killed. So he figures it's better that he goes.

'And you sit here blubbering about a man doin' his job. I don't know where you fit in, any more than I know how he feels about Alice, but I've known her long enough to know she isn't unraveling.'

'She doesn't love him.'

'A woman loves a man in as many different ways as a man loves a woman. I think she does, but I don't give a damn. That's her problem. You got yours. You're playing third string in a tough ball game, but you cut it yourself. If you can't stand to see Tom risk his life, then you better buy a bus ticket.'

She looked up, her face tear-tracked. 'I wanted to ask you to help him,' she said softly. 'You won't.'

'No, I won't. If he wanted my help . . .'

'You wouldn't give it even then!'

'Probably not. I don't want amateurs around when things get rough. They usually get a man killed. You'll see Tom in the morning. Tell him I've already gone after his killer. Maybe you can keep him from doing something stupid.'

'He won't listen to me about that.'

'Then maybe you don't have him cinched as tight as you think you do. I know Alice pretty well, I think. If you ain't awful sure of yourself, she'll shoot you right out of the saddle.'

'Maybe she has already.'

'Maybe she has. Luck, lady.'

He set down his glass and walked out, his spurs clinking together in his hand.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

McCHORD stepped out of the saddle in front of Moses Elkhorn's cabin and tied Brandy's lead rope to the poles that bordered the small porch. A pale, yellowish light showed through the window near the door indicating that the old man had enough money to buy kerosene.

'Come in, Russ McChord,' Elkhorn said at the sound of the cowboy's boots on the worn boards of the porch. When he shoved the door open, the old man was grinning. 'I am glad you came, Russ McChord. This one, Glenn Brock, wanted to meet you some day.'

McChord closed the door and glanced at the heavily built man who sat with Moses at the bare wooden table. Without saying anything, Russ set the bottle of whiskey he had brought on the table next to the one they had been killing during most of the night.

He'd never seen Brock up close before, but even from the hill he could tell that the man was big. In the light from the lamp, hanging above the table, he looked even bigger. He could have been a pro football linebacker, though his face belied any connection with the game. He wore his blond hair shorter than most of his generation and his face was open and friendly.

'Have a drink, Russ McChord,' Elkhorn said loudly. It was the only way you could tell the old man had been drinking. His voice became louder and kind of singsongy.

Russ poured himself some, after digging a glass from the cupboard. 'You two been getting juiced and arguing about Custer?'

'Custer,' the old man exploded, laughing. 'Custer is a good one, Russ McChord. Best day the goddam Indians ever had, and the biggest surprise the cavalry ever had. Poor Custer! Died for your sins, Russ McChord! I'll drink to Custer, then before long we'll drink to Sitting Bull and all those old bastards.'

McChord grinned. He sipped on his drink, while Brock filled him in on the evening's conversation.

'We've been talking about the Bigfoot,' Brock explained. 'Carlene steered me here earlier.'

'Yes, yes, Russ McChord! I wish you had been here to hear Glenn Brock talk of the Bigfoot. He is young, but he has been to many schools. He knows more about the sasquatch than any of us dumb bastards. Pour me a drink.'

McChord poured him one, then looked at the old man. 'I'm going after the sasquatch in the morning.'

'There,' Elkhorn roared, banging his palm on the table. 'There, Glenn Brock! Didn't I tell you Russ McChord would go after the Bigfoot? Russ McChord has balls. Nothing scares Russ McChord except squaws.' The old Indian giggled. 'He's afraid they'll cut off his balls and make him drive a damn car back and forth to work in some city.'

'How did he know?' Brock asked, bewildered. 'Did you tell him before, Russ?'

McChord shook his head, grinning at Moses. 'You don't have to tell him anything. He knows. He always knows. The old devil is half blind but he sees better than I do.'

'But how . . .'

Elkhorn leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. 'The spirits tell all to Elkhorn,' he intoned, then opened his eyes to giggle again. 'Just like a goddam crystal ball, right, Russ McChord?'

'You're drunk, you old buzzard. Indians never can hold their booze. Always getting drunk on firewater and scalpin' white settlers.' McChord rolled a cigarette, enjoying the old man.

'Damn right, Russ McChord. Maybe later I'll scalp you.'

'You can't, you old bastard. I'm part Mohawk.'

'Then I'll take part of your scalp.'

McChord grinned at Brock, who still seemed to be pondering how Elkhorn knew that was going on around him when he was nearly blind and crippled with arthritis. He lit his cigarette and waved out the match.

'Elkhorn just knows things, Brock. They come to him in mental pictures.'

'Like Bigfoot,' said the Indian.

McChord looked at him sharply. 'What'd you say, Moses?'

'Like Bigfoot,' the Indian repeated. 'Sasquatch sees the pictures in the head. He feels men looking at him even when his back is turned. No one can catch a sasquatch because men are always thinking.'

Brock leaned forward. 'I know what he's talking about. It's a theory I read on how primitive peoples talked to each other before language. Mental telepathy. Language is something that takes a long time in evolving, and communication is essential to progress.'

'Then the sasquatch doesn't talk to its own kind?' Russ asked.

'They probably have some words, or sounds, but if Elkhorn is right, those sounds are probably in conjunction with the mental pictures they use. That *could* explain why we've never seen them except by accident. Whenever we get close to them, our mental pictures get absorbed in the Bigfoot's thinking processes and he simply moves off.'

'That's crazy. Even for that old Indian, it's crazy.'

'No, Russ McChord. The sasquatch is not an animal. It's a man. You can't sneak up on a Bigfoot the way you can sneak up on a deer.'

'Well, I can do it,' said McChord flatly.

'Yes, Russ McChord, you can. I know. You're the best goddam woodsman in the country, because you do everything without thinking about it. Like walking. No one thinks about walking, except when you're old and can't walk. You can catch the sasquatch, but he will kill you.'

'In a pig's eye, he will.' OR BULL DUST.

'He will. I see the dead in the snow, Russ McChord, but don't worry about it. Soon we'll both be in the goddam happy hunting grounds. We'll get drunk and scalp everyone. Bring your own bottle.' Elkhorn dissolved in laughter.

'You're crazy, Moses,' McChord grinned.

'I want to go with you, McChord,' said Brock suddenly.

'Not likely.'

'You'll need someone.'

'I don't need anyone.'

'Russ McChord hates people,' Elkhorn put in. 'Russ

McChord says people ruin the wilderness, always hitting deer with their cars and throwing beer cans in the roads.'

'McChord, listen to me. I've spent a lifetime studying everything I could get my hands on about these creatures, and I was raised in the woods. I'm no dummy. I've spent time with the Indians of British Columbia, not to mention that I know a lot about mental telepathy. I can help.'

'I have only one horse,' McChord argued, 'and I have to borrow Elkhorn's to pack in feed.'

'Take my horse,' Elkhorn said. 'Take *both* of them.'

'You only have one, you old buzzard.'

'Two horses, Russ McChord. The children ride them and take care of them, but there are two of them. Both of you go catch the sasquatch with my horses and saddles. Bring me back the scalp. Every Indian should have scalps. What kind of goddam Indian doesn't have a scalp?'

'I don't want company,' said McChord doggedly.

'Both of you go. I see the two of you catching the Bigfoot, not just one. Besides, I won't let you have the horses, Russ McChord, if you don't take Glenn Brock. I don't want you to fuck up my prophecies, anyhow.'

McChord fell silent, sucking morosely at his cigarette, his thoughts wrapped up in the problems of their getting close to the sasquatch. He wasn't concerned about woodsmanship, since he didn't think they needed it. What bothered him now was how Brock would hold up when they came face to face with eight feet of enraged sasquatch.

'Glenn Brock will not be afraid of the Bigfoot,' Elkhorn interrupted. 'Glenn Brock is an important man in this.'

'I give up, Moses, you witchy bastard. Where's your lantern? I can't saddle your horse in the dark.'

'By the door,' giggled Elkhorn. 'Saddle the buckskin and pack the bay. The bay is old and has more sense.'

McChord looked at Brock. 'Can you ride?'

'Sure.'

'Then let's go. We'll sleep at my place and leave in the morning.' He turned to Elkhorn. 'I'll see you, Moses.'

'The Bigfoot will be in the canyon of the elks on Willow Creek.'

'Thanks, Moses.' He paused. 'I'll get you another bottle.'

The old man was looking seriously at the worn surface of the table as they left. His lined face looked ancient and sad.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TOM MURPHY stopped the snowmobile in the lodgepole forest near where John Burack had been killed and used his lighter to glance at his watch. It would be three hours at least before dawn lighted up the Willow Creek area and in that span of time he would easily be well down into where Elk Canyon began. That hadn't been according to the original plan, but McChord's move to launch a hunting trip had altered things.

At first, seeing McChord and that college boy riding horses toward the loner's ranch late last night had confused him. He watched them from the bedroom window until the darkness swallowed them up, before he realized what they had planned. Murphy had been smart to leave early in the morning and use the snowmobile to cover most of the distance. He'd have the lead.

Occasional flakes of snow winked out of the night and clung wetly to his face as he shut off the engine and pulled the Model 70 Winchester from the fiberglass boot. He cursed the snow bitterly, knowing that he would have a difficult enough time trying to bait the Bigfoot without the added problems of a snowstorm.

He adjusted his pack straps and slung the 30-06 over his shoulder before kneeling to fix the harness of the snowshoes over his boots. He felt bulky and restricted in the heavy Air Force parka and grunted with the exertion of snowshoe straps and buckles. The rifle slid from his shoulder and he shoved it back into place, swearing under his breath as he latched the last buckle, and stood up to look at the darkened woods.

The pale light from the snow would be enough for travelling, even though the flakes were beginning to fall harder from the black sky. He started downstream, following the bank of the little creek by listening to the gurgle of the water, and toyed with the idea that he was a fool.

He hadn't slept during the night, but somehow he wasn't tired. Instead he felt a curious elation that he knew had come from his evening with Alice. In that part

of his life he knew that he had been a fool, but he was not sure how it had come about. The memory of the past several years was hazy when it should be much more clear in his mind—a kaleidoscope of color, events and feelings all jumbled together in a kind of meaninglessness that defied pattern. Perhaps, in that respect, it wasn't really kaleidoscopic, since the child's mirrored tube at least had a pattern.

Perhaps it was more like different kinds of paint partially mixed. He grinned. Camouflage, he decided, and liked that description much better. It was a good word. It covered everything. A man's whole life seemed hidden, like a Howitzer, secure under its multi-colored netting. The trouble was that camouflage was impersonal—it filmed everything, leaving a kind of optical confusion that only time could probe.

He had enjoyed himself. He had rediscovered something that had been buried under the strata of time that he had believed was lost. During their love-making Alice had been herself, as had he; and yet they were different. New. An emotional blending that elipsed the physical, transcended even themselves and barely touched a level that was more glimpsed than know. He felt, in a way, as though he understood what had happened even though his brain could not grasp the importance of it. It seemed almost as though they had each discovered a key to the other that had unlocked an avenue within themselves which they had never explored before.

It was baffling in the aftermath, slipping in and out of his reasoning like the lifting and lowering of a fog. Simple and uncomplicated in the embrace, it had become elusive and veiled in afterplay.

He shoved it aside suddenly. The entire process of analyzing what they had found within each other was beyond his ken and he knew it. He was content with what it had been without knowing how it worked or why. All he really knew was that whatever had been missing in his marriage was back, and he was glad.

A bittersweet kind of happiness, though, in view of the task he had set for himself. He could very well end up dead before this thing was over, but then life was always like that for some reason. Give a man a little something with one hand and take a little away with the other.

How many chips would go with this maneuver? All? Or just a few?

There was a dryness in his mouth and his tongue clacked hollowly against his teeth. Beneath the parka he was sweating and his hands were clammy. He pulled the rifle from his shoulder and checked the safety to make certain that it was on, then laid his thumb on it at the ready. He held the rifle ready in the knowledge that the action could begin at any time. He was scared, the way he always had been in combat—the tight stomach, the strained nerves and the feeling that he had to urinate. Like in Korea.

He was no woodsman, no cowboy like Russ McChord, and he had never been. He was a combat Marine and he had been good; his love affair with the Corps only slightly dimmed by the passing of the years. Was he still good? Would his movements be just a shade too slow, his aim off by just a hair? The snow fell with more determination in white, stabbing flakes and he knew that it would hold back the dawn.

It was like the no-name road in Korea, a rutted, snake track of mud and brown water laced with a rime of ice that wound through crumpled hills that hemmed them in. It had been snowing then, a wet, half-hearted sluttering of snow caught in the dried weeds at the side of the road. Patrols. A handful of Marines, dirty and tired, moving carefully, watching, probing. He'd been scared then, as now, doubtful of his abilities, licking his lips in the cold and feeling the bite of frozen saliva against his mouth. He had wanted out then. He had wanted to run, hide, but he had held the M-1 ready and kept moving. Marines don't run, his mind had told him. Marines can't run.

The action that had followed was hazy in his mind, the way the thing with Alice had been. There had been, at one minute, the sound of their combat boots in the mud, the sound of the wind, the rustle of weeds and the rasp of clothing. Then firing. Shots blasting, a grenade going off in a wash of heat, the splash of mud in his face as he hit the side of the road. Flashes in the half-light of morning, amid the whining of lead. Through it all the shouts, the screams and the death. All jumbled and un-

clear now. Little things remained with him. Nothing important, or knowledgeable even.

He remembered lying in the mud with the rifle slapping him in the shoulder, the clip flying. Slam in another. Lock and load. Scared and wanting to run, with tears in his eyes and his mouth all dry. But he hadn't run, and of that he was proud. He lay there in the mud, watching the gooks drop as he pulled the trigger, and pissed on himself—but he didn't run.

Now it was different. Now he *could* run.

Just fold it up and take it on home. No one would say a damned word. McChord was going after the sasquatch. What the hell. McChord was equipped for this kind of thing, and no one knew it better than Murphy. He wished to God McChord had been in *his* foxhole in Korea.

Run?

The thought dogged at him and with it came the instaneous reply. *Can't run!* A reflex answer still programmed even after twenty years. The Corps had done their job well. Logic argued against it, and he turned the logic over in his mind as he moved through the snow on the webs.

The answer finally came up through the muddle of logic. He *wanted* to face the sasquatch, and so couldn't run. Wouldn't run if he had the chance, because it was Korea and the Frozen Chosen all over again. It was football and the championship game once more. A goal had been set, the ball snapped . . . he grinned again into the darkness.

This, he decided, is what a man is for. It is, perhaps, what makes a man a man. He pits his guts and himself against the thing he fears. Not always war or killing. Space, maybe, or the stars. Life.

He'd gone to Korea *not* because thousands of other men were going, and that he was part of a colossal army, but most likely because he had wanted to. He had wanted, deep inside, to see if he had the balls to face death. If he had the courage to fight for whatever the hell some general had dreamed up. Now it was a fight to keep his job, to protect his adopted home, and Alice. Or was it? Maybe it was more to see if he still had it, or if old age was strangling him.

Light was beginning to filter through the clouds in the east, but the thick, heavy snowfall still cut his vision to a few short feet ahead of him. It was a great deal like combat and he half waited in expectation for the soundlessness of mortars to blow up alongside him.

The canyon walls began to steepen along the sides of the creek and he automatically began a swing uphill through scattered pines toward the higher flat. He had hunted deer down this way in years past and knew the lay of the land. A few hundred yards up the steep mountain, through blots of trees, there would be a boulder-littered flat area, dotted with white pine, and he would walk along it for another couple of miles.

His breath came heavier as he started up the slope through the trees and he could feel the pressure of forty-odd years bearing down on him. He was no young man any more, and that thought bothered him. At least McChord was ten years his junior and ought to do better. Then, too, McChord had sense enough to ride a horse.

Murphy reached the sheer, rock-tangled flat and started downstream again, relieved that the uphill climb was over and that his walking would be easier. Another few miles and the trail would split, part of it going back down toward the creek and part of it staying on the slopes. Above him, on his left, the sheer rise of the mountain towered above him with its heights lost in the dismal light and the snow.

Morning came in a kind of seeping glow that didn't seem to come from any particular quadrant. It just developed, lighting up the thick-falling flakes of snow to make the eyes tired with the flickering.

The whole thing was fast. Too fast.

One second he had been walking through the rocks with the rifle at port arms, and the next an enormous, hairy arm reached out and ripped the weapon from his grasp. In a shocked state, Murphy watched the rifle spin through the air and crash into a lone pine, the sling catching a broken dead branch to keep it dangling

Then he was fighting a monster.

The sasquatch was huge, coming from the rocks, the red-brown hair of his body dappled with snow. His growl was a deep rumbling sound that seemed to wrench itself from beyond the open mouth as he lunged forward,

powerful arms reaching. Murphy ducked instinctively under the heavy shape and slammed the hardest right he had ever thrown into the Bigfoot's solar plexus. It had absolutely no effect.

The beast howled in anger and swung a backhand lazily as though he were brushing a fly away. Murphy tried to dodge the swing entirely but the snowshoes got in the way. The heavy forearm caught him across the chest and he felt his left collar bone snap like a twig. The force of the blow lifted him, snowshoes and all, and slammed him into the rock ledge on the other side of the flat. The pack cushioned the blow and kept his skull from being crushed against stone, and while he somehow kept his feet, he sucked hard to regain his wind.

The sasquatch reached out roaring, his big hands grabbing the front of the parka, and when he drew back Murphy felt himself picked up bodily and heaved into the snow as though he were a child. Pain seared through his left side. The ape-man picked him up again and threw him, stunning him.

He was trying to clear his head when he felt the beast grab him by the shoulder and thigh. He was lifted again. Through the falling snow he could see the long incline of the hill below him and the trees that grew on it.

The Bigfoot roared and threw him down the slope.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

McChord swung onto Brandy and rode in bitter silence, cursing the snow that pelted them from the pre-dawn sky. His ribs hurt, his ankle throbbed and his hangover had centered a blazing headache right between his eyes. On top of that, the bacon-and-eggs breakfast that Brock had fixed while he had saddled and packed the horses sat with a queasy uneasiness in his stomach.

Riding behind him slightly, and towing the pack horse, Brock seemed none the worse for wear. The night of drinking, riding and not much sleep didn't seem to bother the big biologist at all. He sat easily on the buckskin and was noticeably careful to guide the horse around the bigger drifts. McChord let his sorrel pick his own way, gigging him occasionally with the spurs when Brandy tried to look wistfully back at the barn.

It surprised Russ a little that Elkhorn's two horses weren't more barn-sour after spending most of the winter cooped up in stalls or the two-by-four enclosure that served as the old Indian's corral. They plodded along with a mute indifference to the entire ride, with Brandy choosing to be the one to act up. McChord decided that the damned gelding knew that he was hung over and so had figured to play cute, shying at snowflakes and snorting harshly at the stubby pines that thrust out of the snow.

They had ridden almost to where old man Burack had been killed when McChord remembered that he had a pint of whiskey in the side pocket of his sheepskin coat. He reined the gelding in on the hill overlooking Willow Creek and pulled out the flat bottle. It was beginning to get light, but the snow was coming down with a vengeance.

He drank lustily. 'How's your hangover?' he asked, handing the flask to Brock.

The big man grinned boyishly and took a snort. 'Thought you might be mad at me,' he said, and handed back the bottle.

McChord shook his head. 'Just feel about to die, that's

all. This'll help.' He slugged down some more, capped it, and shoved it into his pocket.

He spurred Brandy into motion and they started down the long, dipping slope toward Willow Creek.

'Tell me about Moses Elkhorn, Russ.'

'Just an old Indian. Taught me most of what I know about the woods.'

'I mean, how does he predict things?'

McChord snorted. 'He don't.'

'But I heard—'

'You heard an old Indian having fun. An old man playing a game. Elkhorn knew I'd go after the sasquatch because he knows me, probably better than I know myself. He knew enough to tell me that you wouldn't be afraid of the Bigfoot because he knew that would be the first question in my mind, and the old bastard knew the critter would be in Elk Canyon because it's the roughest cover for miles.'

'But the way he said it . . . that was something.'

'Sure. Oh, hell, sometimes he does come up with things that seem almost supernatural, but mostly it's a big act. The only fun he gets any more is pretending he's a great prophet. Before his eyes went bad on him, he used to read all kinds of books on the subject. He'd like to *be* somebody, but he's just an old man.'

'Except to you.'

'Yeah,' McChord said after a minute. 'Except to me.'

After another few minutes of silent riding, during which they splashed across the creek and into the lodgepole forest, Brock rode up close to the sorrel.

'Russ, what about him saying you were going to die?'

'That old buzzard really has you buffaloed, don't he? And t'think you went to college.'

'More Indian bull, huh?'

'He had a reason. That little speech was his way of telling me to be careful, that's all. When I get back from this I'll take him a bottle, and tell him he's full of shit. Then he'll cackle and say you can't win 'em all, Russ McChord.'

'You really like him, don't you?'

McChord uncapped the bottle and swigged at it while he rode. After Brock had taken a slug, Russ nodded. 'Elkhorn is a good man. Must be over ninety, but he was

born on the tail end of the old ways. Trained, when he was young, into the forest only to find that it was gone when he grew up. I guess he adjusted well enough. Better'n me, anyhow.'

'Better than you?'

'I'm a throwback. Misfit, I guess. There's no place left in the world for guys like me. Hell, all a cowboy has to know today is how to drive a pickup truck and string barbed wire. Y'don't need a horse for that.' He paused. 'British Columbia used to be okay, but I guess that's all gone now, too.'

They rode on in silence through the heavy falling snow until McChord reined in Brandy and stepped out of the saddle into snow knee-deep on his leather, shotgun chaps. In the growing morning light, the snowshoe tracks were clearer, even though they were partially obscured by the snow.

'Bigfoot?' asked Brock softly.

McChord shook his head and took out his makings to twirl up a cigarette. 'Snowshoes. I think the Sheriff is gonna beat us to the punch.'

'That's not good,' Brock said, frowning.

'No, it ain't.' McChord lifted the sheepskin coat and struck a match on the butt of his .45 Colt to light his cigarette. 'He'll walk into a trap and get his neck broke.'

'Speaking of traps, maybe we ought to bear in mind what old Elkhorn said about the Bigfoot reading minds.'

McChord snorted smoke. 'Trap's only a trap when you don't know it's there. The Sheriff is setting things up in an altogether different light. Won't have to waste my time with any woods lore business. Didn't think I'd have to anyway.'

'What do you mean?'

The cowboy swung up into the saddle and sat there smoking, his eyes studying the trail ahead. When he spoke it was almost as if he were voicing thoughts. 'That sasquatch has a hard-on for anyone with a rifle, and if he even gets a whiff of us he'll come in tight. Could be that bullet in him might screw up his senses some, too. But Murphy set himself up as bait and it might be a good idea to use him that way.'

'Bait?' Brock's tone was a bit baffled.

'Yeah.' McChord tossed the cigarette butt into the

snow. 'We'll just hang on his back trail . . . close, but not too close . . . and let the Bigfoot jump him. Then we'll move.'

'He might get killed, Russ.'

'Might?' McChord slugged on the whiskey. 'Hell, I'll bet you a dollar he gets killed.'

'We could catch up with him.'

'Way this snow's coming down we'll have enough problems just tracking him. Besides, if there's three of us, the Bigfoot just might decide to clear out. Nope. Tom set himself up on this bronc ride. Let's see if he can stay in the saddle.'

They rode slowly through the snowstorm, following the wide tracks of Murphy's snowshoes as far as they could. When the heavy snow buried them completely, McChord didn't stop. He knew where the Sheriff was heading without the tracks. He would go up along the flat because of the narrowing of the canyon.

'We'll ride up along this trail until the woods peter out and get scattered,' McChord told Brock. 'Then I want to set up a little base camp and get up high. When this storm breaks, if we're high enough, we can glass a lot of country.'

Brock nodded and they pushed on through the trees. Another three hundred yards and the trees thinned out into a fairly steep, pine-dotted slope that angled off to the right and up to the flat. They turned the horses along the rim of the woods to find a campsite, Brandy still snorting and blowing.

'McChord, listen!'

They drew rein and waited a moment. 'I don't hear nothing but the creak of saddle leather.'

'Shut up and listen!'

He heard it then, the thin, wavering cry for help. It probably wasn't too far away, but the storm had a way of scattering sound. 'Guess Murphy didn't get killed,' McChord grinned. 'Brock, I owe you a dollar.'

'Let's go!'

'Hold on. If that's Tom Murphy yelling for help, then he's hurt pretty bad, and I ain't carrying that guy on my back. We'll unpack the bay back there under the trees where we can make a camp, then go after Murphy.

If he's hurt too bad we can rig a travois on the pack-horse to bring him back.'

They peeled the hay and the panniers from the bay, then mounted up and started toward where they had heard the cry for help. Occasionally Brock would call out and the small voice, growing louder, would answer.

Tom Murphy lay near the border of trees, somewhat propped up against one with his leg oddly twisted. McChord took everything in with a glance and spoke to Brock as he swung out of the saddle.

'There's rope and an axe on the sawbuck. Cut me a couple of poles about eighteen feet long and a few about four feet. I'll see if Tom'll swallow whiskey.' He got out the bottle and knelt beside the Sheriff. He shoved the bottle to his lips. 'You ought to be arrested for stupidity, Tom.'

Murphy drank and grinned his thanks.

McChord took a swig himself and handed it back. 'What kind of shape you in, Sheriff?'

'Leg's broken. So's my collar bone and arm, I guess.'

'Been layin' here long?'

'I don't think so. Kept passing out. That Bigfoot threw me from up there.'

McChord nodded. 'Threw me off one yesterday, but it was some smaller.'

'You?' Tom was aghast.

'Yeah, me. My ribs are still killing me and so's my ankle; but my memories will be gone before yours. We'll get you back to where our packs are and make camp, then I'll go up that hill and kill that bastard.'

Murphy grimmaced in pain and reached for the bottle. 'He'll be long gone, McChord.'

'I don't think so. I think he's up there waiting for us right now. He knows we're here from the hollering and if I don't go up, he'll just bide his time and come in tonight.'

'You sure?'

'I'd bet on it, and I just lost one bet already. Never lost two bets in one day in my life. You can rest easy for a while and suck on that whiskey. The sasquatch'll be dead before night.'

With Brock's help, they got the travois rigged and lashed to the sawbuck saddle. With the braces of shorter

sticks roped across for a support, McChord fastened a folded blanket across the poles and turned to Murphy.

'How's your guts, Murph? This is gonna hurt.'

'It's against Marine regulations to scream in pain.'

He didn't scream when they dragged him onto the Indian litter, but his eyes did. When they had him in place, McChord lashed his leg with splints and fastened it to a pole of the travois.

'I can't do much for your shoulder, Tom, but in this snow your leg ought to ride without much pain.' He paused and grinned. 'Suck up all that Jack Daniels. There's another fifth in the panniers at camp.'

They took him back to camp, untied the travois and propped it up against a pine tree. Then McChord unsaddled his horse and jerked the Winchester from the scabbard. His face was grim as he levered in a shell and started away.

'I'm going along,' Brock told him.

'Stay here.'

'Not on your life, McChord. If you get in trouble you'll need me. Besides, I can't lug two broken-up idiots back to town if you goof.'

McChord thought about it, then turned to Murphy. 'You want a fire?'

The Sheriff held up the fifth of Jack Daniels. 'Got one, and it don't smoke much. I'll be all right.'

McChord nodded. 'I don't think this'll take long. That big sonofabitch wants my ass as much as I want his.'

He turned and headed up the mountain through the snow. He moved on an angle that would take him up to the flat, with the heavy bulk of the young biologist trailing along in his wake.

McChord moved easily and carefully, the rifle firmly in his hands and tensed for anything the Bigfoot might try. He didn't think about trying any kind of woodsy stuff on the giant. It wouldn't be necessary. The sasquatch would probably be waiting up there for them, wanting to smash the rifles that he knew all men carried.

A twinge of disgust bit at McChord when he thought about how a simple act of carelessness had brought all this about. He tried shoving it from his mind, but it hung there eating at him. If he hadn't fired that one shot this entire mess would never have come up. The sas-

quatch would have lived out his life in peace and McChord . . . well, McChord would have continued to blunder through the wilderness trying to get out of becoming civilized.

He thought again, in climbing, of how efficient nature is, how she allows no mistakes in the monumental plan she has for man and the wild things. Every time a man, or animal, makes a mistake it costs, in life or in pain, and McChord felt himself in pain right now. What right did he now have to kill a creature that had meant harm to no one? What right did he have to snap a shot at a vague shape near his corral? To kill for food, or because your life was in danger, was one thing . . . but not this.

Those old bastards, as Elkhorn would say of the Indians, understood about killing. They knew about shooting meat, which was one reason they preferred to move away from berserk Bigfoot rather than kill them. But modern man couldn't move, even if he wanted to. Times had changed and the world had grown smaller. The old ways had been swallowed up. In a few years, perhaps even the sasquatches would be gone.

It seemed very complex somehow, but he was doing what he was doing to rectify a mistake. No one told him to come here. No one even knew except Carlene. Karma, maybe? Who knew? All he knew was that he had to come face to face with what he had begun and end it. In his mind, he was sorry and filled with a strange fear that the spirit of the sasquatch would hate him for what he was doing, but he shoved that thought aside brutally. What as he? A goddam Indian?

He had reached the ledge and moved onto it, standing quite still and quiet with the rifle easy in his hands. The sasquatch was there, and he knew it. It was waiting in the rocks. McChord grinned into the falling snow. I can wait, too, he thought.

'What now, McChord?'

'Nothing. Back away from me and wait. He'll come. He'll see this rifle in my hands and want to shove it up my ass. I'll be ready.'

In the silence there was only the snow falling lazily from an adumbral sky. Beyond the ledge, even with the light of day, McChord could not see the rim of trees on the slope below. A yard or two to his left was the sharp,

upright ledge of stone that had crumbled away a million years ago to form this narrow flat spot in the mountain. Above it, he knew, through the tangled pattern of snow, was the peak of the mountain, high, aloof, crowned with an enormous frosting of snow and boulders precariously clinging to the steep sides.

God, how he loved these mountains, these gigantic peaks thrusting through the clouds.

The roar came suddenly from ahead of him, a shuffling and growling through the curtain of snow. A dark shape, looming man'like and grotesque in the space of the ledge. The sasquatch screamed in rage and McChord knew that it was partly with the pain of the 30/30 bullet in him. The shape moved toward him. He could see it through the falling snow.

He lifted the rifle, his thumb ready on the hammer.

'NO!'

Brock lunged at his side, his big hands clutching the carbine, pulling it down in some insane bid to preserve the life of the Bigfoot. In panic, McChord wrested it from his grip.

'Goddam you, Brock,' he roared and slammed the Winchester into the biologist's head. Brock spun away dazed, his body crashing under the lip of the mountain cleft.

McChord swung around to face the sasquatch, but the instant of knocking Brock down had cost him. The ape-man was on him, one massive hand ripping the rifle from his grip and the other crashing at him through the falling snow. McChord swung up his left arm to ward off the blow and felt the bone crack as the big hand hit him. He flew, spinning through the snow and skidding against the stones at the edge of the slope.

He tried to get up but one foot was jammed securely between a couple of half-buried rocks, pinning him. The Bigfoot roared again, a heavy, shadowy bulk staring at him through reddened eyes. Fangs gleamed in the dull light of the snowstorm as the beast moved forward.

McChord pulled the .45 from under his coat, his body on fire with the pain in his ribs and his arm. He pulled the trigger and the Colt bucked in his hand, the slug stopping the animal momentarily. He could see the blood spray from the impact and he kept thumbing back the

hammer and firing with a grim, unhurried determination.

The bullets all hit hard and the sasquatch stopped in his tracks a scant three yards away and looked down at the blood on his chest. McChord could see the pain from the wounds spinning through the giant and the knowledge in his eyes that he was dead. The sasquatch went to his knees.

McChord lay there with his foot twisted in the rocks and the empty revolver in his hand and watched the creature begin to sag. He thought of reloading, but the .45 had done its work. It was over and he had won. Then, when he heard the rumble above him on the side of the mountain, he knew also that he had lost—all in one instant.

Avalanche!

McChord felt a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth as the rumble became a roar. The grin spread and began the shadow of a laugh before he suppressed it. Nature never forgave in her impassiveness. Make a mistake and it always cost.

The roar was like thunder.

He tried to get his foot free of the rocks, but it was useless. The damned sasquatch had turned victory into a draw. He looked at the sagging hulk of the beast who, in turn, was looking toward the coming of the avalanche that neither of them could see through the falling snow. Brock was safe, McChord noticed, lying under the lip of the ledge. The biologist was trying to get up. His mouth was open but McChord could hear no sound over the thundering rumble coming at him.

The avalanche hit with the force of a bomb.

Brock lay in the silence, not believing what he had just seen. A few small pebbles trickled over the ledge that had protected him and fell into the snow. He staggered to his feet, suddenly aware that he was sobbing McChord's name over and over. He lurched toward the great lump of snow that lay across the ledge and fell where he'd last seen the cowboy.

Fingers clawing, he dug away the snow until he had found the boot wedged in the rocks. There was only the boot. Nothing more. McChord was gone, along with the

sasquatch, swept down into the valley under hundreds of tons of snow and rock.

Brock stopped scraping at the snow, tears of frustration streaming down his face. There was only one boot.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE storm had been furious but it hadn't lasted long. The gray-black packs of cumulus clouds pulled themselves out of shape like a disbanded army and staggered slowly away toward the east. Bits of hard, cold blue winked in the splatter of cloud cover and an occasional flush of sunlight washed the emptiness of the Cascades.

He rode the buckskin slowly letting the chunky horse pick his way through the heavy waves of snow as he headed south. Behind him, the bay marched stoically, towing the makeshift travois that held the Sheriff. Behind the Indian rig walked the sorrel gelding, oddly alone with an empty saddle.

The three horses tossed water in sparkling shafts of light, like jewels, as they crossed the creek and went up the hill that would take them to the town of Lodgepole. Brock stared in a kind of numbness at the snow, his heavy shoulders sagging with the knowledge of what he had caused. One word. A shouted word and a gesture, a struggle, and simplicity had become complication, confusion, death.

Moses Elkhorn had been right—a backwoods prophet who had actually seen it coming. McChord was dead in the snow and he, Brock, had been very important. He'd been the cause of McChord's death, and as such, the implement of the old man's predictions. He hadn't intended to grab the rifle. He had known that the sasquatch had to be killed. Yet, he had done it almost without thinking. Why? It seemed more than he could bear.

He shoved away the thoughts because they went around in circles and sat numbly on the horse as they crested the hill and moved across the flat toward the highway and the town. A snowplow was working along the road, heading toward the Circle C ranch.

On the asphalt of the highway, as they rode into the village, the poles of the travois made a scraping sound in the freshly-plowed gravel. People on the street and on the porches stared at them. He stopped at the courthouse and sat in the saddle for a moment.

A woman opened a car door and ran to the Indian litter, and she was crying. Charley Spencer and the blond secretary came out of the courthouse and Brock glanced at them. Charley was running, but Elaine Burns stopped on the porch. She turned and went back inside, closing the door firmly.

Brock stepped down and handed the reins to the deputy.

'What happened?' Spencer asked.

Glenn looked at him briefly. 'It's Tom's story really, Mr Spencer. He ought to tell you, if you don't mind.'

'Sure,' Charley said and turned toward the Sheriff.

Brock went across the street slowly, heading toward the Pine Tree Inn. He needed a drink. In fact, he felt that he needed a lot of drinks to blot out of the pain of the massive slide of snow that had put a period to everything.

Carlene was on the porch of the tavern when he stepped up on to the worn boards. She had seen the empty saddle on Brandy. She knew. It was in her eyes.

'Need a drink, I guess,' he told her.

Her face was calm, but there was a strange hurt look in her eyes. 'May I drink with you?'

'I'd like that.'

He paused before going in, as if thinking. McChord had promised the old man a bottle and Brock would see that he got it. He felt somehow that the old Indian knew, even now, who would bring it to him.

Then he took a last look at the three lonely horses by the courthouse and went into the bar with Carlene.

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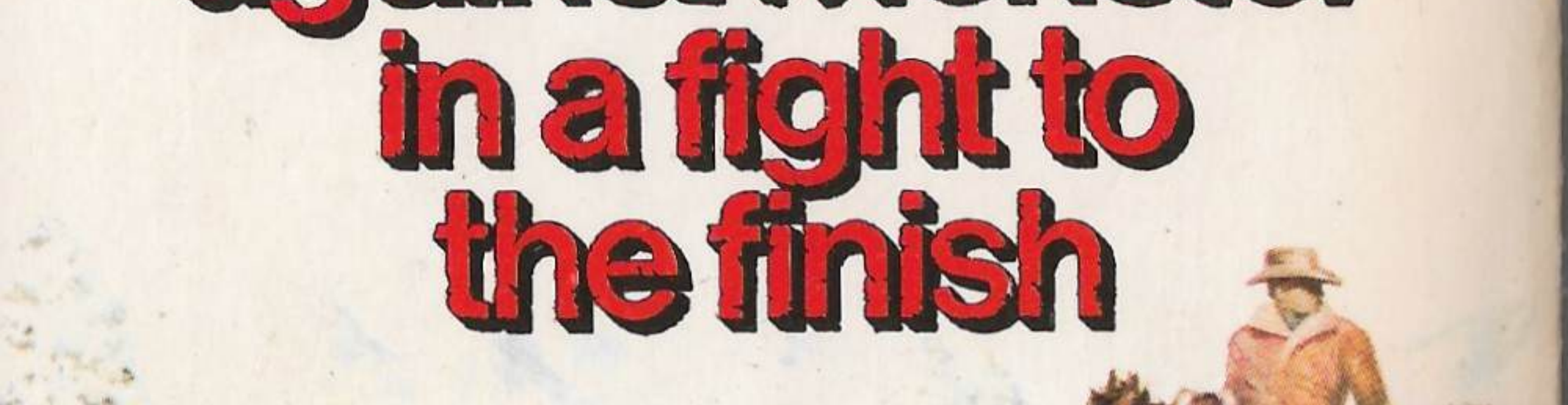
Death in the snow

Out there in the snowy silence of the woods a monster was on the prowl, a massive, hairy creature nearly ten feet tall, with terrible hooked claws and eyes like burning coals. Sasquatch, Big Foot — the names meant the same thing.

The first body they found had no head, and the others were even more horribly mutilated. Finally a loner named Russ McChord loaded his rifle and went after the Sasquatch.

It was man against monster in a fight to the finish



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